

The Neopopular Bubble

PÉTER
CSIGÓ



Speculating on “the People”
in Late Modern Democracy

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*Speculating on “the People” in Late
Modern Democracy*

PÉTER CSIGÓ



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*To the shadow librarians of academia,
without whom this book would not have been completed*

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www.popularspeculation.com

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Introduction

Collective Speculation in Mediatized Populist Democracy

In the past decades of late modernity, the political system of developed democracies has been deeply transformed. A new configuration of politics has emerged in which actors increasingly rely on popular media channels, rather than party infrastructures, in their efforts to connect and control their constituencies. The emerging system of late modern politics in developed countries can be described with the term “mediatized populist democracy.” Late modern politics, through its transition from “party-based representative democracy” to “mediatized populist democracy,”¹ has adopted a new, populist logic that is very different from the old logic of class (group) representation. Late modern politics is populist since its prime reference point is “the people,” who can be reached through popular media channels (see McGuigan 1992), and not the macro-group (class, ethnic, religious group), which once could be reached through mass party membership. The media-using “people” of late modern democracy is, of course, envisioned as a fragmented and plural conglomerate rather than a pure and coherent entity. Mediatized populist democracy has emerged in the last decades because it has seemed to suit better the individualized, pluralized settings of late modern middle-class society, where citizens do not feel they self-evi-

¹ For an explicit theory of this transition, see Mair 2002 and Ankersmit 2002; for very similar arguments, see Manin 1997 and Crouch 2004; and for an early formulation, see Hall 1983.

dently “belong” to class-based political organizations. The following book offers a new media and social theory about “mediatized populist democracy” and its deepening crisis.²

Mainstream scholarly research has grasped the transformations as the “mediatization,” “popularization,” or “professionalization” of politics. These standard concepts express the commonly held idea that political actors in the last decades have adapted themselves to the popular media environment surrounding their media-using electorates. In this alleged process of adaptation, standard theory suggests, politicians have repositioned themselves from party representatives to mediatized symbol providers, and increasingly tailored their symbolic products (visions, promises, solutions, languages) to the immediate affinities of popular media-consuming electorates and to the operational rules of the popular media system. This double adaptation to media and audiences manifests itself in politicians’ efforts to carefully polish their media image, to control the media agenda, to exploit popular languages and affinities, and in their strive to closely monitor the wishes and reactions of popular media audiences and to factor this intelligence into their policy-making strategies. The “adaptation” has commonly been understood as a systemic necessity, still, less a process of passive self-submission than one in which politics is a proactive agent, creatively adopting, appropriating, interiorizing the systemic rules of mediatized, popularized competition. Scholars have fought fierce battles over how to judge this process. Critical scholars have warned that mediatized

² Crisis, of course, is always an old theme; still, it is clear that political thinkers today draw much bleaker pictures about the prospects of democracy than they did twenty or forty years ago. Many critical voices go as far as questioning the democratic nature of First World countries’ political systems. Jürgen Habermas (2015) famously coined the term “facade democracy” to describe our present-day political system, which has been characterized by other influential authors as “postdemocratic” (Crouch 2004) and “oligarchic” (Gilens and Page 2014). In an age when democracy is commonly associated with the rule “of the 1 percent, for the 1 percent, by the 1 percent” (Stiglitz 2011), it is widely feared that the current downturn of democracy signals a terminal crisis of its ability to govern the people according to its will, both in America (Runciman 2013) and in Europe (where it is common sense that the European Union might face collapse due to its chronic inability to handle its fundamental democratic deficits).

politics falls pray to the tyranny of the immediately “popular,” as its logic urges the media-savvy politician to opportunistically respond to the fluctuating moods of popular media-consuming electorates. Meanwhile, the “popular responsiveness” of late modern politics has been welcomed by a growing chorus of scholarly sympathizers, who have seen the mediatization of democracy as an emancipatory historic turn that puts an end to the former elitism of politics.

This standard interpretive framework and commonly maintained discursive “battlefield” has allowed critics and sympathizers of mediatized politics to reflect on important normative dilemmas of media and democracy. There are good reasons to argue, however, that standard accounts have drawn a rather one-sided picture about the recent transformations and the growing crisis of late modern democracy. Academia has been preoccupied with either attacking or defending the “popular responsiveness” of mediatized politics, which has hampered interested scholars to fully take into account the very lack of responsiveness of mediatized populist politics, its self-absorbed logic that makes its actors misunderstand the “popular” realm they so intensely seek to adapt themselves to.

Standard theories of “adaptation” have left their key concept wholly unproblematized, for they have never raised the possibility that social actors may commonly misapprehend the systemic environment to which they aim to “adapt” themselves. Arguably, such a naive concept of adaptation (evoking a long-obsolete functionalism) can hardly be taken for granted in today’s post-2008 era. Standard theories of mediatized politics, unfortunately, seem to entirely pass by the key recognition of today’s postcrisis era, namely, that actors’ adaptation to today’s “late” (financialized, globalized, marketized) capitalist world can be fundamentally undermined by collectively held misconceptions. The post-2008 years have brought growing awareness of the fact that the rational assessment of risks and profit opportunities under the conditions of liberalized markets may be jeopardized by actors’ proneness to proceed with collectively held stereotypes and heuristics, to trust information sources and actors uniquely on the basis of their commonly sanctified pedigree, to follow self-reinforcing manias and collectively blow speculative bubbles. Unfortunately, standard accounts on “mediatized populist democracy” have neglected the presence of such collective delusions—misrepresentations and misadaptations—in today’s media and politics.

Late modern economy and politics, as I will argue in this book, suffers from a deeply rooted, structural feedback deficiency that leads to collective delusions, as it systematically distorts the information actors receive from the systemic environment they try to adapt themselves to. Uncontrolled financial speculation and the breakdown of financial markets in 2008 has been the most apparent emanation of the systemic feedback crisis that has crippled late capitalist economy and society. During the pre-2008 credit bubble, the period that actors falsely believed was bringing the “Great Moderation” of financial capitalism, the prices of financial assets shot up into the virtual sky and retreated from the “fundamental” economic realities that they were supposed to represent. If financial markets failed to reasonably “respond” to fundamental economic processes (like the real worth of real estate, of companies, of borrowers), this has been due to the self-propelled spiral of collective speculation that has pushed itself farther and farther, as an uncontrollable juggernaut.

Collective speculation in financial markets has not been the sole case to manifest the systemic crisis of feedback (or “responsivity”) mechanisms in late modern society. As I will show in this book, today’s political actors are also immersed in a self-referential speculative game, a “bubble” that retreats from reality and follows its self-justifying inner logic. While finance actors speculate collectively on financial asset prices and on to what extent these prices faithfully represent underlying “fundamental” processes, the system of “mediatized populist democracy” nurtures a collective speculation about “the people” and “the popular.” Politicians, experts, and observers commonly speculate on how to win the “popularity contest” of politics, how to win the hearts and minds of their popular media-using constituencies. However, this speculative process has detached itself from the real trends of public opinion formation—and betrayed the “fundamentals” of the political field just as has been the case with financial bubbles and the real economy. Collective delusion, that is, the rise of a speculative “bubble” that systematically misinforms its participants about the “popular” realm they incessantly speculate upon, is a key structural feature of today’s mediatized democracy, with a binding force and long-reaching consequences for our daily lives as citizens.

In order to fully acknowledge the feedback dysfunction that likens late modern politics to the crisis-ridden sphere of late capitalist finance,

we need to proceed in the very opposite direction than the mainstream of scholarly critique. Standard criticism has unproblematically assumed that mediatized politics is responsive to the languages and affinities of popular media and audiences and has focused its critical energies on showing how the ethics of democratic governance, principled debate, and long-term reform are sacrificed by actors' remorseless competition for immediately gratifying popular audiences. By contrast, the following book will focus on the self-justifying collective misconceptions that are driving and inevitably undermining the efforts to gratify "the people." Political actors' basic drive to control voters by getting closer and closer to the "popular" realms they inhabit, it will be argued, is being led astray inevitably by a collective speculation process that systematically misapprehends the "fundamental" trends of public opinion formation in today's popular media environment.

The following book explains the crisis of late modern democracy with the structural defects of responsivity that cripple political attempts to connect and control the popular media-consuming electorate. Accordingly, if mediatized politics is in crisis today, this stems less from its tendency to get "too close" to the immediate moods of popular voter-audiences than from the fact that political struggles for popularity are shaped less by people's real affinities than by the self-enclosed speculative discourses about these alleged popular affinities. The very problem, thus, is not simply that "politicians would do and say anything popular in order to get elected," as the well-known survey questionnaire item would suggest. (Although a staggering 88 percent of American electorates today would agree with it [Gastil 2000, 64], the statement represents less the "true" systemic logic of mediatized populist democracy than the logic of collective speculation about the logic of the system.) Of course, political actors try to gratify "the people" at any price, but the very problem is that they systematically misapprehend "the people" they constantly seek to gratify, as they commonly cultivate stereotypical views about this prime reference point of their field, and they let these commonly held "popular" stereotypes drive politics into a misshapen popularity contest that follows its inner dynamics independently of the popular dispositions it ceaselessly targets.

By addressing the structural lack of responsivity of mediatized populist politics to the popular realm it refers to, new avenues may open for a more powerful critique of late modern democracy. Stan-

dard scholarly criticism, no doubt, has plausibly highlighted the dangers of media- and ratings-driven politics, however, it has suffered from a key limitation, namely that it has shared with the criticized practitioners the view that mediatized politics does indeed effectively respond to existing popular languages and affinities, and that popular media shape the grammar of popular “resonance making.” This view falls dangerously close to the collective knowledge that political actors and media/marketing/PR experts and various commentators commonly cultivate about how the political game has to be played in the “popular media age.”

Mainstream scholarly research, be it critical or sympathetic toward mediatized politics, has not been immune of the collective sense-making process in which political actors, experts, and observers have tried to interpret the newly emerging system of mediatized populist democracy in late modernity. The implication of standard research in its own object raises a discomfoting question: Is it possible that media and political research itself has been a driving force of the collective speculation process in the field of mediatized politics, in the same way as mainstream economic theories and models have acted as driving “engines,” and not mere “cameras” (MacKenzie 2006), of the speculation spiraling in the field of marketized finance?

We will return to this essential question at the end of this introduction.

Mediatized Politics: A “Keynesian Beauty Contest”

The following book proposes a shift from established scholarly theories that find the guiding principle of late modern politics in “the popular” (media, audience) to a new approach that locates the guiding force of today’s politics in actors’ “collective speculation on the popular.” Collective speculation on the popular has become a structural, formative factor of late modern democracy that imposes itself on our lives with a force akin to the “usual suspects” of democratic crisis like business interests or elite power or ideology. In late modern democracy, collective speculation on “popularity” and on “the people” has grown into a self-sustained systemic factor that shapes social life by its own inner logic. This is due to the fact, the following book will argue, that

today's "mediatized populist democracy" forms a typically postbureaucratic, "liquid" system, which means that it aims to control voters through fluid and flexible popular media campaigns rather than the rigid bureaucratic infrastructures of mass parties that had dominated democratic politics in the twentieth century, and the very "liquidity" of politics inevitably unleashes processes of collective speculation about the popular media system that is believed to be the key to "liquid" political control. (This book will lean on Zygmunt Bauman's theory on the "liquidity" of late modernity [Bauman 2000, 2007; Bauman and Lyon 2013] and on André Orléan's theory on the interconnectedness of liquidity and collective speculation, uncertainty and mimetic rationality in finance [Orléan 2014].)

If the standard critique has blamed politics for too much "liquidity," that is, the overly flexible and cunning gratification of the immediate wishes and affinities of the popular audience, my alternative theory is that the "liquid" operational logic that political actors have tried to implement is based on "rigidly" stereotyped representations of popular media and audiences. In spite of all the talk on the allegedly flexible, sensitive, targeted, even individualized, effective campaigns of late modern politics, political actors and experts do not have direct access to "the popular" and "the people." What they have access to and what really drives their behavior, by contrast, is the image of the popular and the people as they are reflected in the mirror of a "rigid" collective discourse that speculates about the new rules of "liquid" popular control in a mediatized political environment.

To understand the challenge the argument brings to standard theories, I propose to start from two analogies by which the two approaches propose to grasp mediatized politics. Standard analysis often likens today's politics to a popularity contest, a televised song contest in which actors "sing" and compete for the applause of audiences (Corner and Pels 2003; Manin 1997). In one of the most important volumes of the standard paradigm, editors have argued: "politics has become more of a 'culture industry,' increasingly resembling a talent show or popularity contest, where polling is as relentlessly continuous as in the music and film charts, and star-gazing and infotainment have become equally central as they are to the tabloids and the celebrity magazines" (Corner and Pels 2003, 2). This metaphor posits political actors along the lines of the survey questionnaire item mentioned earlier—as media

performers who, for good or bad, would do all they can do to please their popular audiences.

This book, by contrast, compares mediatized politics to a rather different type of beauty contest: the one that John Maynard Keynes famously proposed as a metaphor of speculative competition in finance. Keynes likened the stock market process to the beauty contests of print magazines in the 1930s. In these contests, readers were asked to vote through the mail, and those who picked the winner were rewarded with valuable gifts. Keynes's question was what happens if readers vote with an eye on the reward and not merely out of enthusiasm for the prettiest contestant? Such a profit incentive would transform the behavior of the voter, who might calculate that they were not guaranteed to win a prize if they voted according to their own taste. Logically, the successful voters would be those who best guess what the collective judgment would be. However, the famous argument goes, such a guess would not simply deal with common taste. Following that train of thought would be to naively presume that the other voters are acting out of genuine enthusiasm, not calculation. By contrast, if the voter considers all other voters as potential speculators who, like themselves, are going after the reward, the only rational option is to vote for the contestant whom the voter estimates would be perceived by the most voters as the most probable winner of the votes. Thus, in the end,

it is not a case of choosing those [faces] which, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. And there are some, I believe, who practice the fourth, fifth and higher degrees. (Keynes 2007, 140)

Gradually, the process of the beauty contest encloses itself into a self-contained speculative dynamic and secedes from the original question of who the prettiest contestant is.

There are good reasons to liken today's mediatized populist politics to a "Keynesian beauty contest," for it secludes itself from the popular media audience using very similar mechanisms to the ones described by Keynes. In mediatized populist democracy, political actors

are fixated on the idea of being more popular than others, however, this means less simply pleasing the people than defeating competitors at elections. Thus, actors rest their eyes less on the people themselves than on each other and each other's popularity-hunting strategies. The "fundamentals" of the political field, what "the people" genuinely want, is just a secondary question in this process as is the actual beauty of the contestants for Keynes's contest, or as the "real" market value of firms are of secondary importance compared to the actual "sexiness" of their bonds in the eyes of financial investors (Orléan 2014). Speculating politicians, of course, would like to cater to "genuine" popular demands—however, they hope to achieve this by outscoring each other's popularity claims instead of directly understanding "the people as it is." Seen from this view, the contest of mediatized politics reads less as a hyper-responsive process of adaptation than as a self-propelled speculative process in which actors are preoccupied with mutually imitating each other's strategies, so that they potentially make themselves blind to the "real" qualities, preferences, and opinion-formation processes of their popular constituencies. The Keynesian analogy depicts actors of mediatized politics less as charismatic performers than as herding (although nor irrational!) speculators who are hopelessly dependent on potentially delusive collective beliefs about "the popular" and the media-using "people."

As in Keynes's model, actors of mediatized politics do not have the key to the popular public opinion they seek to exploit. What they can access is each other's opinions about how to score popularity points: popular public opinion about popular public opinion. Political actors are driven by collective beliefs on popular media and audiences, which are best grasped as Durkheimian collective representations: living an autonomous life, accumulating the knowledge of many generations, reproducing themselves by their own sovereign symbolic power, independently of the groups of people who invented them (see Pickering 2000). These representations of "the popular" and the media-using "people" are the lifeblood of the self-propelled collective speculation process that shapes mediatized populist democracy.

Collective representations of the popular feed a speculative rationality and incite a type of "herd behavior" that is, however, not unreasonable. In this book's understanding, collective speculation is not the irrational mania depicted by behavioral economists (Akerlof and Shiller

2009). Political actors and experts have good reasons to rely on collective knowledge about “the popular”: they know well that their key target, the popular media-using “people,” is far too wide, too complex, too distant, and too ephemeral an entity—especially in comparison to the “classes” that mass parties once represented—to genuinely unravel its affinities and expectations. Since developing an independent vision of “the people” would be a rather unreasonable endeavor, actors have necessarily turned for orientation to collective intelligence about what is popular and how popularity works. The awareness of the political actor and the expert that their individual resources are unlikely to obtain sufficient information about popular media-using constituencies resembles very closely the concerns of the financial investor who is wary of judging on their own the “fundamental” value of the firms they would invest in and who tries to assess this value by monitoring where the crowds of other investors are investing their money (Orléan 2014).

The speculative reliance on collective intelligence in assessing what “the people” would genuinely affirm as “their own” manifests itself clearly in actors’ retrospective and imitative strategies to reach out to the people by popular means. The retrospective assessment of the popular means that political actors and experts (and also scientists) tend to infer their knowledge about the dispositions and affinities of the popular audience less from in-depth contextual research than from the most notorious examples of how a certain strategy or politician achieved wild popular success in another context, which then can be used as a model to follow. The retrospective mindset of assessing the “popular mind” from what has already proved popular elsewhere (which, again, is not unreasonable, given the lack of material and institutional resources that would be needed for a more original strategy) leads necessarily to the imitation of those strategies or performances that collective judgment regards as prime examples of successful popular mobilization.

In illustration of how collective speculation in politics feeds a self-referential imitative competition for popularity, let us evoke an expert report on Hungarian political life in 2005, when

mainstream parties were racing each other in stealing issues from small parties. The tax reduction program of SZDSZ [the liberal party] was adopted by [Socialist prime minister] Ferenc

Gyurcsány first, then the liberals came up with the idea of the flat rate income tax, which very soon was taken up by Viktor Orbán [the head of right-wing opposition] who spoke about it as his own. But this was also the fate of the [center-right] MDF and its claims for child poverty reduction and for the support of 50+ employees. The two small parties, thus, have been left with the option of criticizing the populism of big parties. How credible this critique was, however, is highly questionable in light of the fact that liberals have taken up Orbán's proposal to reduce the number of Parliament deputies. (Juhász and Szabados 2006, 83)

This familiar scenario illustrates well why the figure of the “speculating” politician who would apply any tactic that made another politician popular has become just as common a trope as the figure of the speculating financial investor who would buy the assets everyone else is buying. This speculative process has reached a global scale, as it is clearly marked by the international traffic of allegedly “popular” campaign slogans and successful political consultants from country to country—paralleling the global flight of speculative capital from market to market.

The self-referential, imitative logic that makes the speculative system of mediatized populist democracy so similar to the system of liberalized, marketized finance is a necessary consequence of the key structural transformations (from bureaucratic to postbureaucratic, “liquid” forms of social organization) that have marked the rise of the late modern age (see Chapter 1 and Chapter 2). In the sphere of politics, these transformations have brought the gradual weakening and emptying of bureaucratic mass parties that so far had self-evidently channeled into politics the will of the social classes into which they had been embedded. As the number of people who feel they belong to parties or related organizations has shrunk the channels transferring the people's will into politics have narrowed. Parallel to the demise of the mass party, new expert institutions of image building, media management, polling, marketing, and consumer behavior analysis have emerged, with the promise of effectively mediating between political elites and the “unbelonging” popular media audience. However, these institutions in themselves—and their model of media-based intermediation, which seemed to be an efficient, “liquid” alternative of party-

based representation—could not compensate for the dissolution of mass membership parties.

Although the new intermediating infrastructures—experts, models, methods, and concepts dealing with popular media and audiences—have commonly been believed to have a strong power (evil or holy) to effectively “connect” the elites with the realm of “the popular,” this mainstream common sense has neglected an important fact. This crucial fact is that these new infrastructures have been used primarily for speculative ends: to test collective knowledge about the popular will, to put things in training for imitating what collective intelligence judges to be the most effective popular strategy, which also means avoiding any in-depth basic research that is not preframed by overhyped collective beliefs. Thus, the growing infrastructures of “popular media-based control” have amplified and expanded the reproduction of collective representations on popular media and audience that have been commonly shared by most actors and voters of late modern democracy. Indeed, the “speculative bubble” democratic politics has fallen hostage to can hardly be reduced to the influence of some PR or public opinion research firms: the “bubble” is to be found in the collective practices of speculative sense making around the imaginary figure of “the popular.”

Neglecting the structural force of “the collective”—beliefs, representations, intelligence, speculation—in the construction of late modern social reality, mainstream scholarly narratives have disregarded the fact that political actors, being dependent on collective symbolic structures, do not adapt themselves to the “exogenous” systemic attributes of popular media and audience, for they take part in an “endogenous” adaptation process in which they expect to achieve popularity by imitating each others’ steps. This imitative strategy may be rational at the individual level, however, it pushes the field into a self-referential speculative bubble from which direct references to the “fundamentals” of the popular realm are gradually eliminated, and the preferences of “the people” are assessed in a self-enclosed speculative game of mutual imitation, evoking the “endogenous” assessment of the market value of a firm in the context of financial liquidity and speculation (Orléan 2014, 65). Revising mediatized political competition as an “endogenous” adaptation process makes it possible to recognize the irresponsible, autistic nature of mediatized politics that secedes from

“the people” instead of opportunistically and immediately responding to popular expectations, as postulated by standard theories of “exogenous” adaptation.

The most worrying effect of this collectively nurtured hype around “the popular” is that, paradoxically, it has secluded politics from an in-depth understanding of “the people.” Collective hype around the popular has undermined—and not increased—the responsiveness of politics because it has urged actors to imitate strategies that common belief has approved as “popular” and successful in other contexts, instead of sensitively detecting the divergent reactions of popular electorates themselves. Thus, it is certainly not enough to blame today’s politics for its hyper-responsive opportunism that is bound to the “logic” of the popular. The paralysis of democracy today stems more from its actors’ self-destructive and irresponsible autism, which is bound to a common logic of stereotyping that politicians follow at any price, whatever the consequences. The speculative imitation of each others’ allegedly “popular” strategies has detached political actors from the constituencies they have tried to enchant, and, thus, has contaminated the political process. Speculation on the popular has undermined the adaptive, equilibrating, and legitimating potentials of democracy and jeopardized its unique potential to forge legitimate reform in time of social crisis.

The Argument of the Book

The book deploys the presented points in seven chapters and a conclusion. Here I briefly present the main line of the book’s argument.

Chapter 1. Late modern social systems from economy to politics have recently undergone a structural transformation process, through which twentieth century bureaucratic modernity has been gradually replaced with a postbureaucratic, liquid model of social organization. This “liquidization” process, however, has unleashed intense processes of collective speculation in various spheres from finance to politics.

The first chapter argues that collective speculation could grow into a structural force today because it is an inevitable side effect of the overall process of “liquidization,” which has been the main systemic

response of postindustrial societies to the felt crisis of the twentieth century model of “bureaucratic control.” Since the 1970s, worries have intensified that the established, bureaucratic “big institutions” of high modern society—like the mass party, high journalism, mass media, the Fordist factory, and the welfare state itself—are not able to connect (motivate, engage) and control the individualized, fragmented population of late modern society. A new conviction started to take shape that a “new age” is emerging which harbors new mechanisms of social control based on the postindustrial doctrine of “speed, mobility, and malleability.” Late modern collective imagination has associated the postbureaucratic, “liquid” settings of late modern society (Bauman 2000, 2007; Bauman and Lyon 2013) with the institutions of “free markets” and “popular media,” which have been commonly postulated as the two key institutions of “liquid control,” dethroning the bureaucratic model of social control that characterized twentieth century high modernity (Beniger 1986).

The background idea of “liquid control,” which has informed most talk about free markets and popular media, has suggested that in today’s individualized, fragmented, plural societies, only “liquid”—meaning: flexible, individualized, mobile, adaptive—mechanisms are able to satisfy and control the diverse and fragmented conglomerate of consumers-audiences. In line with the belief that free markets and popular media bring to life more flexible and more effective mechanisms of individual agency and social control, a great number of social and economic fields have been “marketized” and “mediatized”—“liquidized”—in the last decades.

However, the late modern “marketization” and “mediatization” of various social fields has puzzled social actors about how to behave in their freshly transformed environment. The more social actors have felt their new environment brings new possibilities and new constraints, the more hungry they have become for interpretive narratives making sense of the newly emerging system, of its key rules and imperatives. Thus, the opening of new spaces for action in late modernity has immediately created new dependencies on interpretive narratives that promised to offer the key to the unfolding new world. The most plausible explanations have rapidly and contagiously spread across various interpretive fields—national and global, elite and civilian—and shaped the imagination and behavior of all sorts of actors. A new dominance of overhyped

ideas has sprung from actors' collective efforts to make sense of their quickly transforming society and economy.

The common imagery on the dawn of "New Times" (Hall and Jacques 1989) gave life to contagious, overhyped ideas that did not prove to be particularly new themselves. Expert narratives about the demise of the high modern regime of "bureaucratic control" and about the rise of the late modern regime of postbureaucratic "liquid control" have never left the preestablished, solid, and "illiquid" confines of their broader intellectual tradition that actors commonly invoked in their sensemaking efforts. This intellectual tradition will be characterized in this book as the "modernist discourse" of social analysis. The trope of bureaucratic control that dominated the twentieth century was itself a modernist construct. However, when actors and experts broke with this modernist idea, as they saw it not fitting the new settings of postindustrial society, they instinctively sought refuge in other elements of their vast modernist tradition that seemed to have more successfully stood the test of time and to better respond to the challenges of the era. Thus, late capitalist modernity has brought the age of various "neo-modern" (Alexander 2003a) neo-orthodoxies: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, neoclassical economy in the field of free market economy, and a "neopopular discourse" in the field of popular media and mediatized politics.

The "neopopular discourse" is the common discourse of observers speculating on the new rules of mediatized society and politics in today's popular media-driven age. This "new age" has been invented on the shared grounds of a two-centuries-old modernist discourse on "popular classes," "popular tastes," "popular culture," and "the people." The "neopopular" discourse is the current actualization of this centuries-old discourse, which has served to distinguish the people from the elite. The earliest emanations of this discourse had been meant to legitimate the exclusion of popular classes from the bourgeois citizenry of early liberal democracy.³ From the early twentieth century,

³ In early capitalist democracy starting in the nineteenth century, the idea of "the popular" referred to subordinate, excluded classes deprived of voting rights and property. The modernist polarization of enlightened citizens-proprietors (conferred with democratic virtues) and the popular masses (lacking democratic virtues) has been constitutive to the self-understanding of

along with the political and economic emancipation of the masses, “the people” have increasingly been redefined as sovereign consumers and citizens, whose affinities with popular media, culture, and commodities are prime capitalizable assets for industrial and political actors. In this configuration, the notion of “the popular” has gradually lost its denunciatory taste and stood simply for what the people would support, or like, or listen to, or engage with. The era of Pop arrived. Later, in the last three decades, “the people” have increasingly been redefined as popular media audiences—the term “neopopular” refers to this popular media-focused articulation of the modernist discourse on the popular.

The “neopopular discourse” has been established as the collective battlefield for reflecting on the mechanisms of popular media-based “liquid” political control. Popular media have been commonly grasped as the prime avenues of social control in late modern society, “obligatory passing points” (as Nick Couldry has put it in his important book, 2000, 48) for all actors who want to “connect” and control the popular audiences-spectators-consumers of late modern society. This “neopopular” conception has been shared by most politicians, experts, bloggers, journalists, and scholars, independently of how critically or sympathetically they have seen mediatized democracy.

Being embraced both by critics and sympathizers of contemporary democracy, the neopopular discourse has ultimately driven the mediatization—“liquidization”—of politics. However, the neopopular discourse itself has been much less “liquid” than the new late modern world it

early-nineteenth-century capitalist democracies. In the decades when modern democracy and the modern media systems were constituted, Graham Murdock has argued, two sets of opposite concepts were used to distinguish the opposed groups of modern society: “On the one side stood the crowd, emotional, seduced by dramatic images, acting in concert, bargaining by riot and demonstration. On the other side stood the citizen, rational, open to sequential argument, making considered personal choices and registering preferences soberly, in the solitude of the voting booth” (Murdock 1993, 527).

The opposition has been directly translated into the field of media and journalism. Accordingly, the serious press has meant to provide the citizen with information, while the popular press has provided the scandal and the spectacle that satisfied the lower classes. The polar opposition of noble journalism (sober and responsible) and low journalism (populist and excessive) was invented in the earliest days of modern democracy and has been reinvented again and again in various forms (Tulloch 2000).

has envisioned. Although seemingly flexible and sensitive, the neopopular discourse has maintained a rigid set of assumptions and enclosed its protagonists in its speculative “bubble,” which secluded itself from the popular realm to which it compulsively kept referring. The “liquid,” neopopular techniques of connecting and controlling “the popular realm” could not reestablish the links between the citizen and the state that have seriously weakened with the shrinking of mass parties.

Chapter 2. The fact that “the people” have been increasingly grasped as popular media audiences marks that in collective consciousness, popular media have been gradually reconceived as something deeply constitutive to late modern society and politics. Far from being seen as mere channels of information or persuasion or entertainment, popular media have been thought of as being somehow equivalent with social life. Paradoxically enough, popular media have been increasingly regarded as inevitable channels to control a complex and fragmented society, while at the same time being just as complex and ambiguous as society itself. This paradoxical duality has led to a double consequence: first, elite actors started to “popularize” and “mediatize” the formerly bureaucratic institutions of modern society; second, the same actors—being well aware that the popular media tools by which they aim to control society are just as complex and fragmented as society itself—have convened in a newly emerging discursive sphere in which they commonly interpret the new rules of “liquid” popular control in a mediatized society. This discursive sphere will be called the “fifth estate.”

“Neopopular discourse” is a common interpretive enterprise that is maintained by all sorts of actors and observers who wish to make sense of late modern mediatized society and democracy. These “neopopular” media interpreters—PR agents, bloggers, journalists, marketers, pollsters, consultants, scholars, everymen—make part of a broad discursive sphere that I call the “fifth estate” and will be one of the core concepts used here to grasp collective speculation in mediatized democracy. The “fifth estate” will be grasped as a new power center in late modern society.

Common language has grasped mass media as the “fourth estate.” The term implies that mass media, with their unquestioned authority to inform people about their complex social world, have accumulated a symbolic power that is comparable to the force of the legislative, execu-

tive, and judicial powers of modern society. Paraphrasing this common reference, the notion “fifth estate” attributes a similar power to media interpreters, whose prime task has been to unravel the complex world of late modern media and to guide media actors, communicators and audiences in this labyrinthine universe.

The fifth estate is an interpretive sphere that produces legitimate knowledge on popular media; it is the institutionalized sphere of “neopopular discourse,” which maintains a number of biased, mythical representations about the rules of popularity, about the affinities, preferences, and reactions of popular media-using people (consumers, citizens, voters). The fifth estate harbors the “neopopular” collective speculation on the people, and, as such, is a central element in the flawed system of intermediation (between state and citizen) that has replaced the defunct mass party in late modern democracies. The fifth estate and its neopopular discourse are responsible for the paralyzing responsibility crisis of democracy today.

The second chapter of the book will address the historic process in which the fifth estate has differentiated itself from media production and politics. I will present how the expert interpreters of popular media and popular consumption have freed themselves from the surveillance of media-producing companies, political parties, news organizations, and corporations. These popular media interpreters have commonly reinvented the old modernist discourse about “the popular” and coalesced—with other actors, like scientists—in a common interpretive sphere where they have collectively imagined the new rules of today’s “popular media age.” Drawing on an important study by Pierre Bourdieu (1993), I will argue that the fifth estate has emerged as a “field of restricted symbolic production” that forms a new enclave of collective sense making in late modern society.

This process may well be read as the differentiation of a “secondary” sphere of media interpretation, which plays a similar role to “secondary” financial markets that are supposed to aggregate information on “real” markets. In today’s speculative media system, the fifth estate aggregates all the information about popular media and audiences and defines for social actors the rules of popular success in a media-saturated society. The fifth estate exemplifies how the “liquidization” of late modern society has inevitably led to the rise of “spheres of collective speculation.” “Above” the liquidized socioeconomic fields,

“secondary” spheres of interpretation have emerged that promised to aggregate all available evidence about the particular field. Liberalized financial markets and the fifth estate are such secondary spheres of collective reflection/speculation about the “real-world,” “primary” processes of economy and society. However, these reflexive, secondary markets and spheres have a structurally encoded tendency (as Bourdieu unravels it in his analysis of academia) to follow their own inner logic and detach themselves from the socioeconomic “reality” they reflect/speculate upon.

The argument will serve as the ground of the book’s general thesis, that the “mediatization” of politics has not been driven by popular media and audience pressures but by the way these pressures have been conceived of in the bubblelike—that is, self-enclosed and self-expanding—“enclave” of collective speculation about “the popular.”

Chapter 3. If actors speculating about popular media-based “liquid” control misunderstand the “fundamentals” of the popular realm they speculate upon, this also means that their concerted actions maintain a political system that is unstable and chaotic, since it is not anchored in social reality. Paradoxically, collective speculation on the new rules of liquid control creates a chaotic new world that systematically defies the orderly template of its creation. This structural anomaly ill suits standard positions of culturally informed social theory. To grasp this controversial process of “intersubjective misconstruction,” speculation will be theorized as the production of “collective myths” that totalize themselves into universal truth and blind their followers to even the most chaotic and unexpected outcomes of their operation.

As collective speculation grows into a structural factor of “liquidized” late modern society, it creates and maintains chronic discrepancies between collective representations and the social systems they refer to (media, politics, finance, economy).⁴ These discrepancies are hard to

⁴ Some readers might find hard to accept, even as a hypothetical starting point, my point that late modern politics has fallen hostage to a “speculative bubble” in which actors and experts collectively misperceive popular media and popular audiences. This is, no doubt, a counterintuitive point in light of the fact that mainstream political parties hire hundreds of media and market experts who do their best to map the preferences of media-consum-

grasp with key mainstream theories, like reflexivity, ideology/hegemony, or performativity. Mainstream theories assume a basic harmony prevails between system and interpretation, reality and representation—which are generally understood as mutually constitutive rather than detached. Standard theory can hardly grasp the rise of “secondary spheres of collective speculation,” like the fifth estate or the secondary markets of finance, “enclaves” that tend to alienate themselves from the “fundamental” reality they are meant to represent. We need, then, a new theoretical position that is able to grasp the speculative “enclaves” that in parallel invent and alienate themselves from late modern social reality.

To grasp the power of speculative sensemaking in today’s politics, I propose to address it as a work of “collective mythmaking.” Such a “mythological” approach highlights key characteristics of the speculative process. First, speculation is mythical and not simply ideological because it is a collective phenomenon that equally comprises the dominant and the oppositional, and it is by preframing the space in which their antagonism can be thought of that it exerts its symbolic power. Second, speculation is mythical because it, like myths, circulates collective representations that reproduce themselves by their own symbolic force; they are not necessarily dependent on surrounding structures of power and interest and ideology. I will develop a “mythological” approach to collective speculation and its “cultural autonomy” with the help of the works of David Bloor, Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, and Nick Couldry.

For the “mythological” analysis of neopopular speculation in mediatized politics, the chapter sets as an important reference point the

ing electorates, to invent resonant, media-friendly messages, and to target groups and individuals through all sorts of possible media channels. There is no doubt that experts in academia and industry have at their disposal vast amounts of evidence supporting the common thesis of “popular responsiveness”: that mediatized politics does indeed directly respond to the systemic imperatives of popular media and the affinities of popular audiences-electorates. Actors have good reasons to believe that they have accumulated substantive intelligence about “the popular” (audience behavior, tastes and expectations, the operational logic of the popular media system that serves these popular dispositions). Would all these experts misunderstand the markets they analyze with so much effort? Would public actors, experts, and commentators live in a constant state of denial? As it will be argued, this is not the case.

recent works of finance sociologists and political economists (mostly Donald MacKenzie, André Orléan, George Soros, Philip Mirowski) who have advanced much farther in understanding the collective delusions and collective myths of financial capitalism than media and political scholars, who have mostly neglected the collective misrepresentations that paralyze mediatized populist democracy. Among the two key institutions of “liquid control,” the intimate connections between liquidity and collective mythmaking have been much better explored in the case of the “free market” than in that of “popular media.” The new strand of political economic critique I will refer to has highlighted the prime role of collective conventions in shaping the ideas and strategies that actors cultivate in relation to free markets. The emerging research field on the collective conventions of free-market belief has unraveled how these conventions tend to incite enclave-like sensemaking processes that lose their connections to the reality they refer to. The line of scholarship has highlighted two key aspect of the alienation: the first is that speculative mythmaking develops a self-propelled autonomous force to justify itself and appropriate all counterintuitive feedback (“cultural autonomy”), and the second is that by its self-propelled force, mythical reason undermines the reality it falsely believes to create (“counterperformativity” [MacKenzie 2006]).

The main gain of grasping speculation as collective mythmaking lies in acknowledging that if speculation alienates itself from reality, this does not mean that it produces beliefs that are utterly false. If a bubble of collective speculation paralyzes today’s democracy, as I think it does, it is not because it would impose totally groundless views about popular media or popular audiences. Collective speculation is neither a wrong paradigm that misinforms actors, nor it is a dominant ideology that holds them in false consciousness. If neopopular speculation is mythical, it is not because it produces poor evidence about popular media and audiences, but because it makes it impossible to set the limits of validity of the evidence it produces, and its protagonists totalize this evidence into a universal world model. Speculation as a form of mythical sense making is not simply irrational: its main defect is that it is not able to set limits to its inner rationality, that it does not let itself be falsified.

The very problem, thus, is that actors and experts trapped in the bubble of neopopular speculation are deprived of the means of falsifying their mythical world explanations. This would require the rec-

ognition of those exceptional contexts in which the alleged rules of popularity are not valid for some reason and in which acting out in a “popular” way is counterproductive. Such counterintuitive situations, where being popular is unproductive and dangerous, where it does not pay off to follow the “neopopular” rules of mediatized populist politics, do exist. However, these rule-defying, exceptional situations are obscured by public actors and experts who tend to bring to these contexts the very same speculative rules of popularity that they believe work well in other contexts (the same case has been made, as we will see, by Soros [2009] and MacKenzie [2011] in their analysis of marketized finance). This is a hardly efficient, self-defeating (“counterperformative”) trajectory of collective myths that totalize themselves and undermine themselves at the same time.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. As actors of late modern democracy convene to speculate on popular media, popular audiences, and the new rules of “liquid” popular control, they commonly construct a “neopopular” discursive universe which is mythical in the first place, for it allows the production of a wide abundance of divergent, sensitive, sophisticated interpretive narratives, while it also allows the association of these narratives with a bunch of commonly shared, rigid modernist stereotypes that can be safely reiterated. This mythical duality provides neopopular narratives with a sense of sophistication and saves them from reflecting on the inner limitations of their stereotypes. The mythical oversophistication of neopopular narratives feeds a bubblelike logic of self-expansion that totalizes the myth and restricts the chance of self-limitation, falsification, and “disenchantment.”

Collective conventions of mythical knowledge production restrict the scope and variety of available intelligence to a few simple options; at the very same time, however, they appear in actors’ eyes as sophisticated interpretive tools that allow for a deep understanding of growing complexity, for an effective articulation of heterodox voices, and for a reliable estimation of future trends. This combination of simplification and versatility is the key to their mythical power: collective myths allow their followers to cultivate sophisticated theories, debates, and strategies, in newer and newer forms, without leaving for a minute the safety zone of their familiar, well-protected mythical universe (Barthes 1972b).

The main goal of Part 2 will be to grasp this mythical duality and to unravel the mechanisms of media mythicization in today's speculative media system. Chapter 4 focuses on the academic subfield of the fifth estate, while Chapter 5 addresses the business-oriented branches of the fifth estate: commercial marketing, political PR, and political marketing. In both of these subfields, neopopular narratives have shared a common mythical core of "modernist" tropes that have been inherited from earlier generations of professionals and retailored to the context of late modernity.

The first of these tropes has been to highlight some apparently "popular" instance and to distinguish it from its "unpopular" or "anti-popular" counterparts. This boundary-drawing practice has established "the popular" as a key generative principle that manifests itself in outstanding instances when the symbolic power of popular communication reveals itself in all its force. In the last two centuries, expert analysis of the popular and the people has revolved around such instances, ranging from the fanatic Hitler at a Nuremberg rally to the jovial Clinton playing saxophone in a bar. The second key modernist trope has suggested that such "popular" instances do not arise randomly, for they express some substantive attributes of the people, real existing popular dispositions, worldviews, and preferences. Popular instances, accordingly, reveal some general laws of popularity.

The neopopular discourse has been a common enterprise to tailor these two conventional modernist topoi to today's "popular media age," when the popular connections and dispositions are systematically and relentlessly exploited, for good or bad, by politicians. This retailoring, however, has not been a self-evident task. The inherited modernist template has offered a rather rigid model since it defined the instances and rules of popularity by opposing them to "nonpopular" attributes (rational, complex, substantive, elitist, exclusivist, etc.). Neopopular analysts have had to deploy immense energies to overcome these rigidities and construct complex, versatile, sophisticated narratives about the instances and the rules of popularity. With this work of continuous sophistication, neopopular analysts have hoped that the menacingly growing complexity of the "popular media age" can be meaningfully understood by simply recombining, again and again, the same modernist discursive concepts so that there is no need to leave the familiar confines of their commonsensical, "modernist" interpretive tradition.

By increasingly recombining and making more sophisticated the inherited “modernist” tropes and narratives, by applying them to all newly emerging media forms, neopopular interpreters believed they could catch up with their ever-complexifying media and political world. However, this self-universalizing, aggressively expansive dynamics of the neopopular discourse has not led to a better understanding, but to a gradual self-enclosure and self-inflation akin to speculative “bubbles.”

Chapter 6. In spite of all the neopopular mythmaking, the efforts of media-tized populist politics to explore and exploit the instances and rules of popularity has increased neither the efficiency of “liquid control” nor the “popular responsivity” of politics. Making politics from the neopopular cookbook may bring dangers to the political actor: since neopopular strategies are not responsive enough to the popular realm they want to mobilize, they may trigger unexpected reactions and, thus, they may collapse under their own weight.

The following book presents empirical evidence, taken from Hungary, that the fifth estate’s mythical theories on “popular control” may drive public actors into populist strategies that are chronically inconsistent with the complexities of late modern media and society. In Chapter 6, I will argue that Hungarian public actors, in their attempts to adapt themselves to their popular media environment, have thoughtlessly followed the “neopopular” hints to “connect” with (to enchant and gratify) the popular audience. However, the case of the 2002 election campaign—the first truly mediatized campaign in Hungary—shows that Hungarian public actors, in their populist rush for enchanting/gratifying their audience, have inadvertently destabilized their own mediatized performances by releasing turbulent and latent processes that they were not even aware of.

To understand these undetected turbulences, we need to evoke for a moment the Hungarian political landscape, which since 1990 has been consensually divided into two camps: one of left-wing/liberal forces and one of right-wing/conservative forces. The first governmental period of the right-wing party Fidesz between 1998 and 2002 rearranged this landscape: with the help of heavy mediatized campaigns, Fidesz positioned itself as a “New Right” force that was able to unite the old constituency of national-conservative voters with middle-ground electorates. In the new political landscape, the New Right gath-

ered various voting groups under the ideological umbrella of national awakening, republican mobilization, and modernization—and this move pushed the left to the dystopic pole of social anomy, the past, lack of imagination, disconnect with the future. The governmental efforts to partially repolarize the political space were played out so forcefully that parties in opposition chose to evade the key issues of New Right identity. Although the party in government could blow its horns unabated, its efforts to unite the “popular middle ground” with right-wing voters under a mediatized New Right umbrella failed. The government’s neopopular mobilization efforts proved to be a stunning success among half of the mainstream audience, where the “popular middle ground” happily embraced the New Right’s modernization agenda. However, things did not work out so well in the other half of the targeted “popular audience,” people who expressed interest in biopolitical issues covering threats to people’s physical integrity. In this group the New Right campaign triggered an unprecedented form of polarization: that of right-liberal individualist entrepreneurialism versus left-conservative passive apathy. This newly emerging polarity was clearly unfavorable for Fidesz: after the extreme shock of capitalist transition, many Hungarians expected the state to help people living in misery instead of trumpeting a neoliberal entrepreneur ideology. The “mispolarization” of a crowd of mainstream voters has remained totally unrecognized, however it did prove to be decisive in the failure of Fidesz in the 2002 elections.

The instability and unintended side effects of the 2001–2 campaign were not simple fiascos, fallacious attempts to “connect” to the audience. They clearly did not result from accidental shortcomings or missteps. On the contrary, my point is that the mediatized, populist performance of the government did forcefully affect the audience, but that it triggered two polarizations in the audience: one fully corresponding with the neopopular cookbook and being a key factor of the New Right’s (self-)reflexive strategy, and the other defying the neopopular model and being doomed to oblivion in spite of its decisive force in undermining the government’s campaign.

Chapter 7. The speculative bubble urges a race for popular connection and control in politics, and it blinds political actors to the interruptive forces that are necessarily inscribed into any attempt to “step closer” to popular audience-

electorates. Neopopular, speculative strategies of politicking unleash a new form of destabilizing, interruptive forces, to be characterized as “latent events.”

The case of “mispolarization” presented in Chapter 6 will be theorized as a “latent event.” Chapter 7 argues that the neopopular/populist strategies of connecting and resonance making have induced a new dynamics of event formation: the emergence of “latent events.” Latent events are unnoticed collective mobilizations that emerge from audiences’ common (mis)judgment of attempts to connect in the neopopular media space. They might be regarded as unintended side effects of public and media actors’ neopopular connection strategies.

By latent events, I refer to several types of unexpected collective reactions which are hard to detect on the fly and remain under the radar of neopopular discourse: sudden changes in the public mood, a sudden focusing of attention to certain issues, the collective misunderstanding of certain political messages, or boomerang effects of campaigns that campaign staff are not interested to discover. Latent events will be grasped in this book as invisible and uncontrollable collective mobilization mechanisms that transform people’s views on a mass scale, although actors and experts can recognize their meaning and significance. They are structural factors in the late modern media environment that go unnoticed due to the blindness of the dominant neopopular discourse, which instinctively focuses on the most apparent, thrilling, energetic elements of mediatized politics where popular success is seemingly secure—at the expense of those much less apparent, latent collective mobilizations which make voters’ opinions fluctuate unpredictably and seemingly randomly.

As I will argue in Chapter 7, latent events are not simply exceptions to the rule; they do not merely evade the rules of popularity that actors commonly believe to be universal. More than that, latent events are the chaotic side products of actors’ neopopular, speculative political strategies. Latent events are collective mobilizations that are triggered by neopopular strategies, but which suspend those very neopopular rules of “popular connection making” that have shaped their creation. Latent events manifest the self-defeating, “counterperformative” character of neopopular speculation.

The fifth estate has constructed a vision about a new political and media age in which the universal rules of “popular connection” irre-

sistibly urge actors to “connect with” and “get close” to the popular audience, to create resonant popular experiences. This populist preoccupation has concealed the self-contradictory nature of “popular connections” in today’s competitive, plural media system. As a consequence, the neopopular strategies that public actors have followed in order to handle the uncertainties of mediatized politics have produced a truly chaotic environment that creates many situations (which often exist in contourless form as our “latent events”) where the neopopular strategies themselves are inefficient.

Table 0.1 summarizes and forecasts the key differences between mainstream scholarly theories that grasp late modern media and politics as “responsive” to the “popular challenge,” and the alternative approach proposed in this book that defines these systems as “irresponsive” and “speculative.”

Table 0.1: The Standard Neopopular Model and the Alternative, Speculation Model of Mediatized Politics

	The standard model of a “popular” media and political system	The alternative model of a “speculative” media and political system
The model’s underlying imagery of late capitalism	Pre-2008 imagery of a triumphant “liquid” capitalism that effectively bends all society to its own logic	Post-2008 imagery of a chaotic speculative capitalism with pathological outcomes and no apparent cure
The new organizing principle of late modernity	Liquidity: flexibility, hybridity, post-Fordism, deregulation, global flows of capital and culture	Speculation: the rise of “enclaves” of collective speculation about the “liquid” systems of late modern society and economy
The popular media system	A coherent “regime” in which actors’ interpretations and strategies correspond with the objective attributes of media and audience	A schizophrenic system in which a “secondary” sphere of speculation detaches itself from the “primary” reality of mediatized society
The “mediatization” of politics	Systemic adaptation to the “exogenous” dispositions of the media audience and to popular media formats which reflect them	A process of mythmaking and “endogenous” adaptation where actors mutually imitate each other’s allegedly popular strategies

	The standard model of a “popular” media and political system	The alternative model of a “speculative” media and political system
Key impersonators of new politics	Popular/populist politicians from Clinton to Berlusconi, successful spin doctors, popular campaign slogans, popular TV hosts, etc.	The crowd of politicians, experts, bloggers, journalists, academics blowing overhyped stories about mediatized popular politics
Mediatized political competition is ...	A popularity contest, a televised “song contest” of politicians-performers trying to enchant the people	A Keynesian beauty contest of politicians-speculators trying to imitate and forecast each other’s strategies
The crisis of mediatized democracy	Overresponsivity: politics closely follows the fluctuating expectations of popular audiences, falls hostage of popular media logic	Irresponsivity: politicians’ self-propelled speculation on the popular makes them autistic and blind to unexpected feedback
The structural binds of political action	Power and status structures: media system, audience preferences, big business financing mediatized electoral campaigns	Symbolic structures of collective mythmaking about how to manage popular media and audiences
The system of mediatized democracy	A transparent, “normal” system that is governed by the “new rules” of popularity	An opaque, “postnormal” system in which the “new rules” of popularity are valid and are suspended by a random and latent pattern

The Post-2008 Critique of Late Modern Democracy

Throughout this introduction, I have repeatedly targeted the “standard” analysis of mediatized populist democracy and argued that it is complicit with the popularity-hunting political practices it tries to analytically and often critically engage, since it shares with practitioners the key assumption that the logic of “the popular” (media, audiences) has colonized the field of mediatized politics where all actors have to adapt themselves to the systemic rules of popularity.

The implication of standard criticism in its own object can hardly be left unreflected in today’s post-2008, crisis-ridden era. Indeed, if

the economic breakdown in 2008 has left us with a lesson to learn, it is certainly that the theories and methods actors believed in to grasp the essence of late capitalist economy have been too much embedded in the new world they tried to model and understand, and, thus, made an integral part of the delusive collective frenzies that proved to destabilize this world with unexpected intensity. Unfortunately, scholarly researchers of popular media and democracy today seem much less willing than economists to acknowledge their implication in the historic processes—the “mediatization” and “professionalization” of politics—that they analyze. Mainstream scholarly research lacks the self-critical idea that it may be intimately connected to broader, distorted interpretive discourses that misapprehend the fundamental realities of the envisioned “popular media age.” The following book is an attempt to lay the grounds for a new, post-2008 critique of mediatized politics, to offer a viable alternative to standard narratives which, arguably, have made integral part of the discourse of neopopular speculation that has (mis)driven political actors’ so-called “adaption” to popular media and audiences.

The proposed post-2008 critical position will be established by analogy to the self-critical efforts in the field of economics, where the magnitude of the 2008 financial breakdown made scholarly self-renewal an urgent and inescapable task. The most established critical arguments have objected that the neoclassical/neoliberal economic mainstream uncritically embraced the free market as a superior coordination mechanism, and, thus, supported the zealous marketization of all economic sectors. Mainstream economics, the established criticism goes, justified (rather than simply explored with a disinterested regard) the new free market infrastructures that proved to be unsustainable in 2008. This line of criticism sets an important analogy for this book’s attempt to implicate media scholars in the rise of neopopular discourse and the mediatization of politics. However, it is also arguable that the established critique of the promarket mainstream stopped halfway on the road to a deep renewal.

In the last years, a more radical critical current in economic thinking has emerged, where my own post-2008 critique finds its true analogy and antecedent. These new and radical efforts in critical economics (e.g., Mirowski 2013a; Bryan et al. 2012) have taken into the scope of their critique not only the market-believing mainstream but

also their most established market-critical alternatives. This current has urged a more thorough self-criticism in economics, with the aim of renewing the mainstream of criticism just as much as the mainstream of the neoclassical/neoliberal establishment. Such a radical critical program fits my post-2008 claim that mainstream scholarly narratives, whether critical or sympathetic to popular media, are equally part of the collective “neopopular” speculation since they share with practitioners their basic assumptions about the “new rules” of mediatized politics.

In economics, a unique manifesto for radical self-renewal came from economic historian Philip Mirowski (2013a) who has examined why the established criticism of neoliberalism was so weak both academically and politically that it could not profit from the 2008 breakdown. In his book (which he intended to be a “provocation to the Left” [Mirowski 2013b]), Mirowski argues that critical voices failed to make a major breakthrough because they were unable to free themselves from the conventional frames of economic controversy. These frames have allowed for dissenting voices to challenge dominant beliefs only in misshaped and unproductive ways, as negative mirrors of dominant voices (such as calling for state control over markets, promoting tax increases instead of tax cuts, opposing noble public investment to frivolous private speculation, Keynesian to monetarist crisis management, or Tobin tax to casino capitalism). Such reversals may have offered safe roads for critique, but they also made critique predictable and easily refutable, since they were too reminiscent of those old debates that have been played a hundred times already (and too many times led to neoliberal victory in the eyes of the public). The lesson to learn from this, Mirowski has suggested, is that as long as critique takes up pre-given, preestablished positions in the collectively maintained battlefield of ideas, it is bound to play the complicit role of His Majesty’s Opposition, that is, to represent the “ever-worse alternative” that always appears to be inferior in collective consciousness, no matter how faulty the dominant approach may prove to be. In order to pursue a more effective critique, the only reasonable strategy is to reject the collective game book that imposes a closed set of intellectual choices on actors.

It is exactly in this spirit that I will grasp and criticize neopopular speculation as a field of “collective mythmaking.” My conviction is that in the post-2008 critique of mediatized politics just like in that of the

marketized economy, we need to open new grounds that make it possible to challenge not only the dominant voices, but also the established forms of dissent—and first and foremost, the collectively maintained, mythical battlefield of their established controversy. Challenging these mythical battlefields is vital, for it is exactly in such shared and pre-established spaces of antagonism that critics and sympathizers of the dominant order convened to commonly construct the collective representations of “free markets” and “popular media”—the collective imagery of late capitalist modernity.

There is no doubt that the neopopular scholarly discourse on media has been connected to the pre-2008 collective imagery of late modernity as a postbureaucratic age of flexibility and liquidity. The most forceful emanation of this imagery has certainly been the decades-long portrayal of globalized free-market capitalism as a globally triumphant regime that forms everything to its own “liquid” logic with an overwhelming force (see Chapter 1). As free markets in the sphere of economy, popular media in the spheres of politics and culture have commonly been conceived of as powerful, key institutions of “liquid control.” This pre-2008 collective imagery of a liquid, postbureaucratic modernity has been translated into the standard claim that “the popular” reshapes the field of politics. It is on these grounds that critics have dismissed the mediatization of politics as a process of colonization in which democratic politics falls hostage to popular media imperatives and popular audience expectations and populist PR campaigns.

The apparent cracks in the late capitalist edifice in 2008, however, have brought into question the millennial vision of a forceful, triumphant new order of “liquid” late capitalist modernity. In reaction to the financial breakdown, a new imagery has started to take shape in public discourse that regards contemporary capitalism as “disorganized and pathological in a much more fundamental way” than formerly established theories have assumed (Bryan et al. 2012, 310). The post-2008 imagery of a chaotic capitalism has revolved around a very different intuition, a new affinity with collective delusions and collective failures. The post-2008 zeitgeist has been marked by the common anxiety of passengers on a sinking ship: the economic breakdown has immensely intensified worries that our societies feed unsustainable processes at every level, from global warming or ageing to the acceleration of inequality and indebtedness. Understandably, the sphere of finance,

the heart of the system of financial capitalism that collapsed in 2008, has been in the focal point in the new imagery of a chaotic late capitalism. Key to this new worldview has been the idea of collective delusions, speculation, and bubble blowing.

This emerging post-2008 imagery of late capitalism as a self-defeating juggernaut has inspired my efforts to build a new critical theory of “liquidized,” mediatized democracy, and of liquid-modern social order in general. Pre-2008 theories of late modernity have intimately related to the imagery of late capitalism as a triumphant regime which colonizes and wipes out all the “enclaves of pre-capitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated” (Jameson 1991, 36). By contrast, the proposed, post-2008 critique will broaden its focus on the ambiguities of late modern social organization in general, since, as it will be suggested, it is these universal tensions that manifested themselves the most apparently in the recent breakdown of late capitalist economy. Key to these ambiguities is the fact that although today’s “new” order may efface the old “enclaves” which contradict its logic, it also creates new enclaves.

The post-2008 critique deployed in this book will address how the late modern “liquidization” of society, economy, and politics incites the emergence of new, interpretive “enclaves” (“secondary spheres of collective speculation” like derivative markets or the fifth estate) which are supposed to control the “liquidized” (marketized, mediatized) realities that most actors find threateningly complex and uncertain. Thus, the focal point of my post-2008 critique lies not in the question of how irresistibly the logics of “free markets” and “popular media” are imposed on society, but in the question of how irresistibly the new interpretive “enclaves” are able to impose on society their own understanding of the logic of the late modern age.

Post-2008 critique is dialectical: it points to the fact that the more the neopopular logic of “liquid” control unfolds itself, the more its discourses and practices fold into their own speculative “enclave” and detach themselves from the “fundamental” reality they try to make sense of, mistakenly, in “popular” terms. The dialectics of bubble blowing, this unresponsive and dysfunctional condition of mediatized populist democracy, is the result of a paradoxical process in which actors implement new mechanisms of “liquid control” that would connect with “the people” more efficiently and genuinely than the

“rigid” mass party, but what they end up creating is a self-totalizing mythical universe that alienates itself from social life. Collective speculation in late modernity may thus well be seen as another paradoxical fulfillment of the historic, dialectical process in which, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002) have so forcefully forecasted, enlightened reason continuously expands itself and regresses into myth.

The rise of collective speculation into a key structural force of late modern society calls for a Frankfurtian agenda of dialectical theorizing that needs to be established as the core of the post-2008 critique of mediatized democracy. This requires a new awareness that in an uncertain, liquid environment, “collective sensemaking” (collective intelligence, collective belief) becomes inevitably a structural force—a mythical power which offers a “false clarity” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, xvii), which justifies itself by folding into itself and aggressively expanding its inner logic at the same time (see Chapter 4), which equally sidelines alternative justifications and awareness of the chaotic side effects of its own operation.

Perhaps most importantly, a post-2008, Frankfurt-type critique of the “dialectic of liquid modernity” (see the conclusion to this volume) has to be grounded in a broader, historical awareness of the long-term continuity of collective sensemaking discourses. Pre-2008 criticism has tended to offer theories of the present and linked the ills of mediatized politics to the material, power, and prestige structures of late capitalist society as they exist today. Pre-2008 criticism fed from the imagery of a triumphant late capitalism that would restructure social life according to a utopian model justifying the privileges of the main beneficiaries of the “liquid” utopia. Such a conflict-theoretical approach, which grows logically from the pre-2008 zeitgeist, is fully compatible with Marxist critique, liberal pluralist critique, and rationalist elitist critique.⁵

⁵ In the pre-2008 critique, popular media-driven politics has been blamed for failing to emancipate people politically and for serving elite interests (Marxist critique), for failing to respect the diversity of late modern society (liberal pluralist critique), for failing to educate and enlighten the people (rationalist elitist critique). By contrast, the proposed post-2008, dialectical critique of late capitalist speculation is more concerned with Weber’s “iron cage” than with Marx’s capital, falls closer to a Nietzschean critique of enlightenment than its rationalist endorsement, and is more interested in societies’ collective fate than their inner pluralism.

By contrast, the proposed Frankfurt-inspired critique rejects presentism and grasps mediatized populist politics as a contingent configuration shaped by broader-scale, longer-term civilizing forces. (In the original model of Adorno and Horkheimer, the industry of mass culture in America in the 1930s and 1940s was not the product of capitalism *per se*, but of the dialectical unfolding of the process of Enlightenment, of which American-style consumerist mass culture was merely one possible articulation, along with the enlightened rational state, or the Nazi state or Communist state. All these articulations have been seen as products of a self-defeating Enlightenment process, in which the world is “disenchanted” and rationalized and controlled by the “free man” of modernity who himself becomes object of total control of homogenizing and oppressive institutions that are erected in the name of modern myths about the new man. The post-2008 critique of “liquid” modernity identifies a similar dialectical process, in which the modernist intellectual tradition is used to build up a “new world,” but what is being produced instead is a totalizing mythology about the new world.) Our common, “modernist” intellectual tradition that feeds collective speculation about today’s “liquid” capitalism is rigid and illiquid. This irresolvable tension between rigid concepts and complex realities, which has shaped modernity since its inception (Bauman 1993), and has not ceased to shape it even in its most recent, “liquid” phase, is the main object of the post-2008 critique proposed in this book.⁶

⁶ The same historical awareness has informed Mirowski’s important critique of neoliberalism and its critics. Mirowski has argued that the success of neoliberalism can hardly be grasped by the usual explanations offered in critical literature, like the fall of the profit rate or an elite-led counterrevolution in the 1970s and 1980s. The key is not to be found in the present, in the dawn of the neoliberal age, but decades earlier, in the 1940s and the 1950s, when neoliberalism was a marginal sect whose ideas fully contradicted the dominant common sense of the era. Recognizing that on the common “battlefield” of ideas they were bound to lose, neoliberals successfully reshaped the whole battlefield. They created a new language and opened a new location for refighting the centuries-old battles between the believers of market and state, capitalism and socialism. As neoliberals overturned their “socialist” opponents, it now has become the task of the left to open new locations and prepare itself for the swinging back of the historic pendulum. However, as Mirowski complains, the left today is still preoccupied with fighting old battles on old battlefields where it would not be able to win.

The rigidities of collective mythmaking—that is, the ordering of the world along preestablished concepts that narrow down the space of thinkable alternatives—may have never been as important as they are in today’s “liquidized” world, when collective speculation has become a fully authorized process. Therefore, any critique that fails to open up the “collective battlefield” of preestablished mythical controversies is bound to fail. The standard, pre-2008 critical accounts, which have restricted themselves to condemning the mediatized, populist game of late modern politics, have failed to offer an alternative vision about how to play the political game in a way that is more efficient than the “popularity contest.” Standard academic narratives have failed to offer a new understanding of the rules of the game that would substantially differ from the “neopopular” vision politicians and popular media experts themselves had in mind. Standard criticism, which restricts itself to articulating normative objections against an allegedly triumphant system while accepting the self-representation of the system itself is highly vulnerable: it can be neutralized, refused, and turned against itself in a single moment.⁷

⁷ An illustration: the migrant crisis. To illustrate the vulnerability of the standard critique, a recent debate in Hungary about the refugee problem can be cited as a telling example. The pieces to be cited are by journalists and not scholars—however, the arguments are exactly the same that scholars have regularly used in their debates (which shows again the collective scale of “neopopular” sensemaking). In 2015, the Hungarian government launched an openly xenophobic public campaign against the refugees then flooding over the southern Hungarian border. A key element of the campaign was erecting a 100 km-long fence along the border with Serbia. All along the media spectrum, commentators accepted as evident that the campaign had been designed by one of the most malign political consultants in the United States, Arthur J. Finkelstein, a master of fearmongering political mobilization. A prominent young journalist, András Hont, was quick to respond. Presenting Finkelstein as a dark and powerful manipulator who would relentlessly use all the well-proven tools of “scapegoating, fearmongering and the exploitation of ignorance,” Hont argued that the spin doctor could probably not have found “a more perfect laboratory for his methods than Hungary, a country where the cruel attack an invented enemy, going out of their way to round up a few hundred miserable refugees, while they let, even authorize, those in power to rob them of all they have, to detrimentally erode public services, and to do in each and every respect the very opposite of what they had promised in order to get in power” (Hont 2015). Another young journalist, Balázs Ablonczy, a supporter of the right-wing government, did

The post-2008, dialectical critique unravels the self-undermining, inefficient character of neopopular speculation. Such a new critical approach is able to offer an alternative vision about mediatized politics, a new understanding that is not complicit with common sense.

not hesitate to attack the liberal lament over the government's anti-refugee campaign. In an open letter dedicated to a fictive "friend who is a defender of liberal rights," written three months before Hont's piece, Ablonczy argued: "[Y]ou apparently respect all the sensibilities of the world, except for those of the majority living in your city and your country. It is comfortable, of course, to expect compulsory solidarity with the starving whales of Tibet, while criticizing your surroundings as prejudiced and malign. But you know, this reminds me too much to the exclusion you claim to fight so much against. . . . Do not pretend that the choice is always between heaven and hell, that it is the eternal evilness of the men of power/your surroundings that makes them choose what you do not like" (Ablonczy 2015).

The journalist's defense of populist politics corresponds entirely with the government's position. Consider how a leading politician, Antal Rogán, answers a critical question from a journalist from a right-wing online news platform:

[Journalist:] The [anti-immigrant] steps of Fidesz and the government resulted in a rise in their popularity. They have transformed immigration into a political product.

[Rogán:] Let me turn back this argument. In my view it is desirable for a government to speak about the questions people find important and to make decisions in these issues. Immigration is such a question, and nothing could prove this any clearer than the one million voters [the number of people returning a questionnaire posted to all households by the government] who took part in the national consultation about the problem. Of all our consultations so far, this has been the second most successful. It is not us, then, who made a political product of the issue of immigration, but the people themselves. (Rogán 2015)

These arguments—don't they sound familiar from scholarly debates?—make it clear that the standard critique of political spectacle, even if presented with noble intentions such as Hont's, is hopelessly vulnerable to populist counterattacks. The latter will always be able, and not without reason, to identify exclusion in enlightened progressivism and genuine popular authorization even in the most cynically executed political campaign. The case suggests that critical, oppositional efforts that stay inside the burdens of the neopopular discourse can easily be neutralized and rejected because they do not differ that much from dominant voices (see Section 4.4 in Chapter 4 and Chapter 3). By assuming that populist communication does indeed "respond" to popular affinities, the standard critique accepts the play from the collective game book of "neopopular" mythmaking, and, thus, condemns itself to lose to the main beneficiaries of the neopopular discourse.

This potential is important, but it does not make, in itself, the proposed approach truer than its pre-2008 standard predecessor. Since my book's "speculative" model of mediatized populist democracy is admittedly just as much inspired by the post-2008 imagery of a self-undermining speculative capitalism as neopopular models have been embedded in the pre-2008 imagery of a triumphant capitalism, it could hardly be seen as offering a truer or more objective vision than the standard neopopular model it challenges. Both approaches are deeply embedded in their zeitgeist and should be conceived of as two alternative—potentially mythical—perspectives on mediatized populist democracy. Thus, if "neopopular" knowledge about media and audience is a collective myth, this book's "speculative" model is aimed at being its countermyth. The following book can hardly do more than establish a countermyth and support it with theoretical, historic, and empirical evidence—which does not mean disproving, in a strict sense of the word, the neopopular opponent.

Constructing countermyths is still vital today, for, in a future next step, alternative countermyths might be translated into alternative hypotheses that could be controlled by empirical means. Countermyths might incite, then, a work of mutual falsification that might set the limits of the validity of the models and "disenchant" late modern politics from its mythical bounds.

Part 1.

The Speculative Media System

Chapter 1.

Speculation and Liquidity in Mediatized Politics and Marketized Finance

Mainstream research has sought to read out the meaning of the mediatization or professionalization of politics from the relationship between the media and the political system. This has been a highly simplistic approach. Recent changes in politics make an inherent part of much broader transformations of late modernity, marked by the rise of liberalized (financial) markets, the “liquidization” of contemporary institutions, and new speculative tendencies at various professional fields, including academia. Starting from this broader perspective, we can recognize that the so-called “mediatization” of politics, which from a narrower, strictly media-versus-politics viewpoint seemed to be a simple process of systemic adaptation (politics adapting itself to the imperatives of popular media and audiences), has been a much more complicated and deeply paradoxical transformation, bearing in itself the inner contradictions of late modern societies’ structural transition from a model of bureaucratic control to one of postbureaucratic liquid control.

1.1 Two “Neomodern” Myths in a “Liquid” New Age

Since the 1970s, a new collective imagery has emerged that has envisioned the rise of a new era in the history of modern society, capitalism, and democracy. Key theorists of late capitalism and late modernity have all been concerned with “liquidization” as the prominent struc-

tural transformation of our age (this common concern is evident in spite of divergent vocabularies¹). The concepts of liquidity and liquidization (Bauman 2000) get to the core of the structural transformations through which the (allegedly) more rigid and immobile institutions of twentieth-century “high modern” society and economy gave way to more fluid institutional settings. In the last three or four decades, high modern institutions of bureaucratic control (Beniger 1986)—like the welfare state, the Fordist factory, the bank, the mass party, or high journalism—have been dismissed as rigid and obsolete, and “liquidity”—flexibility, fluidity, adaptivity, mobility—has been introduced as the new organizing principle of the new era.² The “liquid” power of late modern infrastructures has raised high hopes and high fears among observers.

In the process of late modern “liquidization,” the institutions of “free markets” and “popular media” have played a key role, due to their allegedly more flexible, more individualized, more mobile, more adaptive mechanisms that have been thought to efficiently cater to the divergent affinities and preferences of social and economic actors in our individualized, fragmented, plural societies. Accordingly, free markets have

¹ Vocabularies of liquidization, of course, have been different. We may evoke here concepts like “disorganized” capitalism (Lash and Urry 1987, 1994; Offe 1985), “flexible accumulation” (Harvey 1990), self-scrutinizing and risk-aware “reflexivity” (see Giddens and Beck’s study in Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994), networked and project-based production (Castells 1996, Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), cultural hybridity (Pieterse 2000, Featherstone 1995, Hal and Jacques 1989), identity play and bricolage (Hetherington 1998), and countless accounts on late modern individualization.

² In this long-dominant imagery, late capitalist economy has been declared a new “free market” economy that is characterized by post-Fordist, flexible, and networked production at liberalized markets by a new global mobility of production, goods, and capital at integrated global markets, by the increasing role of unregulated, liquid financial markets in economy, and by the rise of new players profiting from the new conditions of flexibility, mobility, and deregulation (powerful multinationals, a new financial class, a cosmopolitan global elite). Late capitalist society has been depicted as a pluralistic, individualized, fragmented, middle-class society in which social life is fully saturated with popular media (new and old), popular culture, and consumption. Late capitalist democracy has been depicted as a system in which political actors address their fragmented constituencies as popular media audiences and try to engage them through popular media channels and popular media-tailored, targeted messages.

been thought to outdo the inflexible, ineffective state (and the old type of economic and financial institutions paralyzed by state regulation and by low levels of innovation) in organizing economic activity. Meanwhile, popular media have been thought to outperform the rigid and elitist mass party, high journalism, and mass media in “connecting,” informing, and engaging the popular audience, the media-immersed “people.”

In recent collective imagination, the late modern era has been established as the “age of free markets” and as the “age of popular media.” These images became commonsensical collective representations, which accumulated a strong symbolic power to shape actors’ strategies in the new, “liquid” era of late modernity. The images of “free markets” and “popular media” have embodied a vast amount of underlying theories that have reflected on the uncertainty and opacity of the unfolding new world and offered meaningful cues for disoriented actors. These commonly cultivated theories have revolved around the utopian/dystopian ideas that in the age of late modernity, economy can most effectively be organized through the mechanisms of the free market and society can most effectively be governed through the channels of popular media. The theories maintaining the collective representations of “free markets” and “popular media” will be referred to in the following—with some intended irony—as the “new age theories” of late modern society, economy, and politics.

“New age theories” on free markets and popular media have been “neomodern” (Alexander 2003a), “neo-orthodox” constructs: they have reconfigured and applied to contemporary society long-established, orthodox, “modernist” intellectual traditions that have shaped social analysis for two centuries. Expert theories on the free market age and on the popular media age have been deeply rooted in the early modern and high modern traditions of social analysis, and actively used these traditions to make sense of the late modern era. New age theories may well be read then as the key currents in our societies’ collective endeavor to reinvent—for the “second” time, as many have argued (see Beck and Lau 2005)—their own modernity in opposition to a “less modern” twentieth-century past.³

³ In their attempts to grasp the “second coming” of modernity, both neomodern discourses have turned to orthodox modernist theories of individualization and secularization and differentiation that they have been retailored and

The two groups of “new age theories,” and their key representations of late modernity as an “age of free markets” and as an “age of popular media,” have been interconnected at several points. However, they have fostered relatively distinct visions about the emerging “new age,” and have been represented by distinct groups of expert actors and institutions. The mythical image of a “free market age” has been invented and imposed upon society by three self-proclaimedly neo-orthodox discourses: neoclassical economics, neoliberalism, and neo-conservatism. These discourses have shared a common tendency to go back to the roots of economic theory, to the moments of pure beginning, when they saw the economic and moral spirit of modern capitalism flow freshly and yet purely through undistorted “Walrasian” markets.⁴ Neo-orthodox narratives on the “free market age” have mobilized a closed set of interrelated concepts to grasp the essence of the era they associated with the reign of the market and the demise of the state, with the end of state-led planning, with privatization, liberalization and labor market flexibility, with social spending cuts and fiscal balance, with global free trade and the free flow of capital, with the centrality of finance. In parallel, today’s common sense of living in a “popular media age” has emerged from a similarly neo-orthodox discursive endeavor in which actors and observers have applied century-old concepts on “the popular” (popular classes, tastes, media, “the people”) to late modern society. These discourses might reasonably be called “neopopular”: they have associated the late modern age with a long-established concept, “the popular,” that they saw to manifest

applied to late capitalist society. Along these neo-orthodox lines of interpretation, both the free market and popular media, it has been argued, emancipated themselves from the control of the nation-state and developed their own autonomous systemic operational logics that suit the individualized and secular nature of late modern society.

⁴ Importantly, as all analysts of free market neo-orthodoxy have pointed out, this nostalgic utopianism did not mean a wish to return to the lost paradise of laissez-faire capitalism when the modern state and its regulatory or redistributive interference had been minimal. Rather, it meant to distill the key utopian elements of the free market and to apply them to the actual historic circumstances when the modern state regulatory and redistributive powers are expanded. (This is similar to the way Lenin hoped to save the utopia of communism in a very different context from where it was born.)

itself in the new cult of media, style, expressivity, music, and image. The imagery of the “popular media age” has revolved around the concepts of celebrity and spectacle, of lifestyle and stylized identities, of consumer experience and the brand, engagement, affect, and expressivity, the omnipresent screen and the media saturation of life, selective, nomadic audiences, new tribalisms, and cultural globalization.⁵

⁵ Envisioning the new age of the free market, neoliberal (neoclassical, neoconservative) currents have declared the end of state interventionism, which they have debunked as a highly counterproductive, primitive tool in the hands of political forces who tend to use the arms of the state to enforce their own particular values or interests. Neo-orthodox economic currents have welcomed the free market as a more developed coordination mechanism that leads to a higher social optimum, since, once freed from artificial constraints, it is able to deploy its inner systemic mechanisms to implement, as much as it is possible, all the values and interests of its competing members. This neo-orthodox vision has constructed an economistic vision of society, portraying its institutions and actors as rational, calculating agents who are born to profit-maximizing competition, and who bypass state regulation they feel too rigid and thus should only be governed through market incentives. In this spirit, the new age of the free market has widely been associated with the dismantling of the former power of the state. The state has been undermined equally as owner (privatization), as regulator (market liberalization), and as social integrator (reduced social transfers and employee rights). At the national level, the new era has meant to free private capital from the regulatory constraints of “state-led planning” (Harvey 2005) and to marketize state-managed public services. At the international level, neo-orthodox actors have welcomed a new era of global free trade, which demolishes national subventions and protectionism and secures the unconstrained presence of global corporations in national economies. Neo-orthodox actors, of course, did more than simply unravel the systemic logic of an unfolding era: they have also invented the “new rules” of behavior that free market actors should follow, and imposed these rules on society. In parallel, today’s “new age” has been embodied by another set of paradigmatic actors and ideas. In this alternative imagery, the coming age of late capitalist modernity has been commonly associated with a new dominance of the popular, a new emancipation of popular tastes, a new revolt of the masses, a riot of celebrity, spectacle, lifestyle, and consumerism, all flowing through the channels and services of the popular media system. The key organizing logic of this “popular media age” has been embodied in the symbolic tropes of the omnipresent screen, the brand, the image, the style. The social actors of the new age have been depicted as popular audience-consumers immersed in a selective, nomadic quest for intense experiences, affects, identities, self-performances, engagements, tribal linkages. The coming popular media age has been believed to bring a new, heavily cultural-

Although fostering two relatively distinct visions on the unfolding world of late modernity, the “new age theories” have been overlapping and copresent at the level of practice—so much that often they can only be distinguished analytically. As the idea of the free market has been constitutive to today’s popular media system, so have the tropes of popular media and popular audiences informed the strategies of most market actors. On the one hand, actors of the leading markets of late capitalist economy have increasingly postulated that they do not simply fight for the applause of consumers but for the minds of popular media audiences. Producers felt that the value of their commodities is increasingly defined by their branded image, that commodity markets can hardly function without the mediating channels of popular media which are key to produce consumer identities and to articulate consumer demand. Meanwhile, as the popular media system itself has been marketized and a plethora of commercial media service providers have appeared, it has been acknowledged that media themselves work by the laws of competitive markets. (Thus, it might be argued with some reason that the collective tropes shaping our era have often been the notions of “mediatized free markets” and “marketized popular media,” and not simply free markets and popular media.)

ized and mediatized economic system, in which symbolic value has primacy over use value, for it is the force of brands and not functional superiority that makes the difference between products. Popular media have been seen as the prime vehicle attaching symbolic value to commodities. Following the vision of a mediatized economy, in which consumer behavior merges with media usage, the previously separate practices of marketing, PR, advertising, and content production have also merged into a complex and well-organized media “production culture” (Caldwell 2008). Consumer behavior analysis and market research have been reconfigured into applied popular media and communication studies (see Chapter 4). Along the same logic, all-encompassing media-management practices like “360-degree marketing” or multiplatform campaigning have become key organizing ideas of the popular media age. At the international level, similarly to the neoliberal vision of global free trade, the popular media age has been associated with the global flow of standardized cultural artifacts (movies, celebrities, TV shows, brands) and the resulting hybridization of local and national cultures. Part of the globalization process, national democracies have increasingly adopted the American model of mediatized democracy, in which politics adapts itself to the alleged imperatives of popular media and to the dispositions of popular media-consuming political audiences.

The “free market age” and the “popular media age” have been invented and created by the hegemonic representatives of the two new age discourses. Among these representatives, the most important were political institutions, economic actors, and various experts who have strenuously advocated the idea of free markets or popular media. Among the most powerful free market advocates, we find international organizations (World Bank, IMF, ECB, OECD), the main institutions of liberalized finance (e.g., investment banks or credit-rating agencies), international political institutions or alliances (the “Troika,” EU regulators), iconic personalities (Reagan, Thatcher, Greenspan, Merkel), neoliberal economists (the “Chicago boys”), free trade corporate lobbies and many mainstream neoclassical economists. The “popular media age” has been advocated by a different group of actors: “popular media experts” (endowed with the converging skills and tasks of the marketing expert, consumer behavior analyst and PR agent), brand managers and advertisers, pollsters, political consultants, and many scholarly researchers of popular media and culture, political communication, marketing, consumption.

Meanwhile, critics of these new models have formed rich alternative spaces where these new models can be criticized. The vision of a free-market-driven economy has been challenged by Marxist, Keynesian, and ecological approaches. The vision of a popular media-driven society has been criticized by media and cultural critics in academia, in journalism, in the civil sphere, in the blogosphere. These criticisms have added their own part to our understanding of the “new age” in which we live. They have developed counterdiscourses that challenged the mainstream, but also served as a negative template against which the enthusiasts of free markets and popular media could form their own hegemonic positions. On the whole, it can be legitimately argued that critics of free markets and popular media have been more complicitly involved in the maintenance of these hegemonic new age theories than they would acknowledge.⁶

⁶ Given that, we need to point here to an important difference between the way the two new age discourses have worked in academia. In the field of economics, neoclassical and neoliberal views have clearly been dominant. “Heterodox” post-Keynesianism and neo-Marxism have been openly discredited by the academic mainstream and their views have been exorcised

Representatives of the two types of “new age discourses” have abundantly created new narratives and theories, new methods of measurement, and new apparatuses of control that they hope to use in order to grasp the very essence of the ongoing structural transition to the new age. Professional and lay accounts about the alleged “new rules” of the new age have quickly crystallized themselves into widely circulating collective representations that have defined for actors the know-how of success and survival. These transition narratives have commonly envisioned a shift from an obsolete past that has been presented in opposition to the values of the free market and popular media.

Neo-orthodox free market discourses have asserted the obsolescence of state-led planning, of the inflexibility of the labor force, of duty-protected national economies, of all artificial limitations on market competition⁷—these remnants of the obsolete past have had to be dissolved in the coming new age of the free market and its individualized, networked, flexible (“liquid”) coordination mechanisms. In the fields of popular media and mediatized politics, too, “new age theories” have been abundant. This is because public actors and journalists—similar to universities, service providers, companies, book publishers, or rock bands—have felt that their field has been increasingly exposed to the pressures of the popular media environment and its abundant

from mainstream textbooks which have sanctified the efficient market as the ultimate mechanism of economic coordination. By contrast, in the academic research of popular media (and political communication, popular culture, or popular consumption), critical voices have been much more established. The critique of the popular media age has become an integral part of textbooks, critical and sympathetic voices have mutually recognized each other’s standpoint and tried to integrate it into their own. The “neopopular” discourse in academia openly involved foes and friends of “the popular.” (This openness, as we will see, has paradoxically hampered the self-critical renewal of scholarly research, while in economics, where the hegemonic position has unanimously celebrated the free market, critical self-reflection has become inevitable after the 2008 crash.)

⁷ Interestingly, even antitrust regulation has been reconceived in such terms, as the artificial restriction of productive, successful firms to expand their powers on various markets simultaneously. Accordingly, free market competition has been reconceived as the liberty of the big fish to eat the small fish, for the sake of the higher common good, that is, the higher satisfaction of the consumer (Crouch 2011).

media channels, quickly spreading media gossip and scandal, its spectacles and celebrities, its always-on audiences, and so on. Actors have commonly developed newer and newer theories explaining the rules of survival in the emerging settings of the media-driven society. In the sphere of politics, there has been a common tendency to assert that late modern politics has entered a new age that is dominated by the new rules (new rules of communicative behavior, but also new technologies and new genres) of commercialized popular media.

The implacable self-confidence by which the discourses on free markets and popular media have contrasted an imagined “new age” with its old and obsolete predecessor reveals their “neomodern” character that is key to their “neo-orthodoxy.” Today’s neo-orthodox “new age theories” (it will be documented in Part 2 in detail) have grown out of the hegemonic discursive tradition of “modernism” that for centuries has shaped the self-understanding of modern societies. The dominant, “modernist” tradition of intellectual reflection has been built up in the collective enterprise of generations of analysts who have hoped to understand modern society by applying to it the key dilemmas and key binaries of modern philosophy and social theory (object vs. subject, individual vs. society, etc.) (Bauman 1993; Slater 1997; Grossberg 1996; McGuigan 1992; Alexander and Smith 1993; Alexander 2003b and 2006a). Driven by a dilemmatic thinking about consent and choice, social order and individual sovereignty, homogeneity and pluralism, subordination and emancipation, the “modernist” discourse of social analysis has revolved around the key question of social control and individual agency.

The “binary-producing machine” (Grossberg 1996, 94) of the modernist discourse has been highly useable to formulate “new age” theories by asserting a new order to dethrone the old one. The modernist discourse could appear as a self-evident framework for understanding social change due to its specific epistemic character which has allowed its basic theoretical distinctions to be projected into time. As the retrospective analysis of modern philosophy has made it clear (Habermas 1987; Heller 1999), the opposition of old and new, premodern and modern, past and future has lain at the very core of modern self-understanding. The key generative opposition of old and new has been deeply encoded into the various conceptual binaries which have embodied the modernist dilemmatic thinking about social

control and individual agency. For example, the classical distinction of object and subject has recurrently been inserted into narratives on historic change. Critical modernist narratives have often used the trope suggesting that so far people were “objects” of history but now they are “subjects” of history—or the other way around. Rationalist media critics have taught us how the “objective” voice of elite media surrenders to the “subjective” voice of popular media. Popular media sympathizers, by contrast, have welcomed how the subordinating rationalism/objectivism of elite media surrenders to the emancipating subjectivism of popular media. In a strange combination of all these narratives, propagandist Karl Rove asserted that the objectivist, “reality-based community” of elite journalists is the mere object of today’s history, while those new masters of popular communication who create purely imagined/subjective realities are the real, formative agents-subjects of history (see Soros 2009).

Projecting conceptual binaries into time has been the ultimate modernist procedure to model historical change. And here is the key to why modernist discourse appeared to be such a convenient, self-evident tool to theorize today’s “new age”: it has provided experts with a plethora of homologous conceptual binaries with which they could easily establish the meaning of the “new” in opposition to the “old,” and, thus, to grasp the essence of today’s newly awakening “second modernity” with the very same interpretive tropes by which their modernist predecessors separated the modern from the premodern (Alexander 2003a).

1.2. The “Modernist” Invention of the New Age of Popular Media

The modernist discourse has appeared as a self-evident interpretive framework to understand the “new age of popular media” since it has offered a comfortable, familiar toolkit to distinguish the “popular” from the “unpopular” and the “new” from the “old.” The neopopular discourse, thus, may well be seen as a recent actualization of the “modernist” discourse.

The neopopular imagery opposing the newly emerging “popular media age” with its predecessor has successfully combined various

elements of the modernist intellectual tradition. I mostly refer here to, first, the classical dilemmatic thinking of modernist social theory about subordination and emancipation; second, the classical modernist dilemmas of media analysis (Who controls whom in modern media systems?, Is control top-down or bottom-up?, How does media control their audience?, and How can audiences control their own media usage? [see Blumler 1979]); third, classical modernist understandings of consumption (either as dominance through the manipulation of desire or as self-realization and empowerment [see Slater 1997]), and fourth, the classical modernist dilemmatic thinking about “the people” and “the popular” that have conventionally been contrasted with some form of “elite” culture (see Gans 1975; McGuigan 1992; Murdock 1993; Tulloch 2000; Laclau 2005). During the past three or four decades, the modernist discourses on emancipation, media, consumption and the people have been reconfigured as a relatively coherent “popular media discourse”—or “neopopular” discourse—which posits “popular media” as the prime terrain for consumer and citizen identity formation.

The modernist discourse has provided the actors of the “popular media age” with key binary concepts by which they could collectively separate the “new and popular” age from its “old and nonpopular” predecessor, and individually inject this distinction with all sorts of possible meanings. The copresence of a collectively maintained distinction on the one hand and its varied individual explanations on the other is crucial. For, on the one hand, the collective labor of establishing the foundational distinction between the popular and the nonpopular has made neopopular narratives overlap. Behind them has lurked a shared understanding of “the people,” understood as (to a certain extent) self-controlling popular media audiences. Neopopular new age narratives have commonly asserted that today’s popular media and political audiences are somehow more “active” or “free” than were their predecessors, the loyal mass audience of broadcast television and the class-based, loyal constituency of the mass party. However, on the other hand, the “activity” associated with popular media audiences has been explained in very different ways, it has been grasped with very different modernist binaries. Accordingly, today’s audiences have been depicted as more disloyal, or more selective, or more elusive, or more prone to fanatic addiction, or more attraction seeking, or more superficial (quick

browsers versus disciplined learners), or more self-interested, or more consumer-like, than had been the mass audience/constituency in the past era.

Neopopular theories on the “popular media age” have made various prognoses about how the old succumbs to the new in the fields of media, advertising, and politics. Accordingly, it has widely been forecasted that the

- Age of radio/TV/broadcasting/print/text is over, the age of image/digital/Internet/narrowcasting has begun
- Age of media scarcity and top-down access control has capitulated before the age of media abundance
- Age of passive, conformist mass audiences is over, we live in an age of active, elusive, selective, critical media users
- Age of attentive media “reading” and learning has given way to the age of surfing and browsing and immediate gratification
- Age of mass media advertising is over, marketing and PR offer more efficient techniques to connect today’s ad aware and critical customers, welcome in the age of direct marketing, or 360-degree marketing
- Age of interruptive ads and ad impressions is over, today’s consumer can be influenced through flowlike engagement and media-tized experience
- Age of lifetime party loyalties is over, today’s voters prefer to select from the mediated political supply in an audience-like and consumer-like manner
- Age of political agenda setting and gatekeeping is over, today’s media agenda follows the waves of audience interest that can be rippled by many actors
- Age of ideologies is over, we live in the age of media image, spectacle, style, personality, and celebrity

Among neopopular “new age theories,” the normatively oriented ones (typically fostered by scholarly analysts, journalists, bloggers, public intellectuals) have typically raised the question whether the increased popular activity is a genuine one. Are today’s selective, elusive audiences genuinely self-directed, are they empowered and liberated by their new opportunities to follow their own tastes? Or, on the con-

trary, is this the activity of the dumb, the one who lacks any effort to go beyond the immediately familiar, the one who bypasses any educative or enlightening or complex voice, and happily chooses instead the least common denominator or the brainwashing propaganda? Meanwhile, the more pragmatically oriented neopopular narratives (cultivated in marketing, PR, consultancy, market research, or applied public opinion research) have embraced the “activity” of audiences in the popular media age. They have grasped “active” audiences as sophisticated, quick, cunning people who evade all communication that they see as old-style, slow, irrelevant, or turgid. The key question in these narratives was how the increased activity of the popular audience can be exploited in the new age, how today’s media-immersed “people” can be connected and controlled in innovative new ways that they themselves recognize as “their own.”

Whether normative or pragmatic, critical or affirmative, neopopular narratives have shared the common conviction that popular media harbor cultural populism (McGuigan 1992): they reward those actors who address people in an authentic way that people recognize as familiar and responsive to their personal needs and expectations, in a clear language, with an attractive and enchanting performance. Accordingly, the popular media system has been seen to reward (for good or bad) the “best populist” and the key to popular success has been thought to lie in populist communication. In the new age of popular media, neopopular theories have suggested, those actors can get along who are able to connect the popular audience by sensibly detecting their inner affinities and desires, to connect them on popular languages they are able and willing to use, to connect them in the exact way in which they themselves want to be connected.

Given the (highly debated and still commonly assumed) “emancipation” of popular media audiences, neopopular narratives have commonly suggested, today’s media and political actors are required to actively (reflexively, professionally, effortfully) connect their audiences with their messages, while audiences have plenty of new opportunities to actively connect with media and political actors if they wish to do so. In the same spirit, neopopular accounts have grasped commercially driven popular media (from commercial broadcast TV to Facebook) as powerful, attractive, mobilizing, enchanting institutions that, with their “resonant,” auratic force and felt authenticity, have a prominent

power to “connect” (enchant, gratify, engage) the “active” (selective, distrustful, elusive, consumerly) audience. These collectively recited attributes of the popular media age have seemed so plausible that they have been quickly accepted as the new iron rules of “mediatized populist democracy.” It is along these lines that actors and observers of late modern politics have tried to figure out how voters’ loyalty can be secured in the newly emerging popular media environment. Actors have commonly produced widely circulating collective representations about the “new rules” of politics that adapts itself to the populist imperatives of the popular media system.⁸

In light of the known trends of bubble blowing in the late capitalist economy, there are good reasons to suspect that many of these plausible narratives about a new, commercialized, popular media age have drawn a misleading image about popular media and political systems. The “neopopular” discourse is speculative, I will argue in this book, due to the fact that its self-contained sense making dynamics overshadows the question of how much this common knowledge production fits with the “reality” (of the media-using “people”) it tries to make sense of. This overshadowing effect emerges because the credibility of the neopopular discourse springs more from the authority of the modernist interpretive tradition that it represents rather than from its fit with the actual context in which it is applied. Arguably, the more its fit with reality becomes hard to assess for actors due to the liquidization process that melts the frames of social reality, the more tempting it becomes for actors to stick to collectively sanctified, modernist neopopular tropes at any price, and to bend all unexpected evidence about public opinion or popular preferences to these tropes instead of revising the collective myth itself in light of unexpected feedback arriving from the real world of media-audience interaction.

The feedback problem of the neopopular discourse has crippled political representation and caused a responsiveness crisis in politics. This

⁸ It may be worth evoking here a typical account of a scholarly marketing expert who explained Bill Clinton’s popularity with his ability to establish resonant connections with people: “Clinton gave people what they wanted to hear, with just the right language, words and phrases that would resonate with the American public” (Johnson 1997; quoted in O’Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2002, xii).

critical illness of modern-day democracy results from a key structural problem of late modern society, namely the fact that collective beliefs about social reality seem to offer more solid access to this reality than the conventional (bureaucratic, regulated, pyramidal, large) “big institutions” (see section 1.5.) of high modernity that had promised to establish a more direct link to society and economy (e.g., the bank that assessed on its own the risks and profit opportunities of debtors individually, or the party that represented electorates through its own infrastructures).

1.3. The Fifth Estate: The Discursive Sphere of “Neopopular” Speculation

In the previous sections, I have presented two types of neo-orthodox discourse that have fed collective speculation on the alleged rise of a “new age” of free markets and popular media. As we have seen, today’s neo-orthodox discourses have had their roots in the modernist interpretive tradition that has shaped modern societies’ self-understanding since the dawn of modernity. Having addressed the discursive roots and tropes of the “neopopular discourse,” we shall turn to the actors and institutions maintaining it. As in the previous section, we will start from a more general perspective.

Although speculation is a collective process, it requires high-level expertise, so the symbolic power of expert and lay speculators is unevenly distributed. There is no doubt that the production of collective belief on free markets and popular media forms a complex symbolic economy that would not work without high-profile expert institutions that make sense of the media and the market. However, this sense making, as I have argued so far, is itself greatly shaped by the collectively maintained interpretive tradition that, in the eye of the public, guarantees the plausibility and familiarity of the “old” stories experts like to tell about the “new” world. If these “new age narratives” can contagiously spread and solidify into common belief, this is due to the fact that they embody collective wisdom and not merely elite knowledge. This leads us to another paradoxical dilemma of the “age of new age theories” in which we live: What is the role of experts in an envi-

ronment of collective speculation where everybody acts as an expert speculator? Acknowledging collective speculation as a key formative force requires the reconception of the standard scholarly understanding of the role experts play in the marketization and mediatization of late modern society.

The mediatization and marketization of late modern societies have immediately brought with themselves the emergence of expert apparatuses designed to explain how free markets and popular media work. These market- and media-interpreting institutions have become highly visible actors in late modern capitalist society.⁹ As they have increasingly intervened in today's marketized and mediatized economic and social life, their interventions have shifted the focus of scholarly attention. The mainstream research on market experts,¹⁰ international economic organizations, popular media experts, or "cultural intermediaries" has been built on two basic assumptions. The first assumption has depicted these experts as effective professionals whose knowledge or ideology harmonizes with the objective, systemic conditions of the

⁹ These expert apparatuses have been "disembedded" from particular fields, in the sense that they sold abstracted, non-field-specific intelligence to various actors who felt their field to be exposed to the pressures arriving from competitive markets or popular media. These high-level interpreters have drawn persuasive visions about the structural burdens that markets and media impose on their actors. They have made credible promises about the profit opportunities that would reward those who play well by the new rules of the market and the media.

¹⁰ The figure of "market experts" has been highly elaborated in social research. As I will show later, mainstream scholarly approaches have drawn three imaginary figures impersonating the supposed role of market interpreters in today's society. The first figure is that of the self-reflexive expert who effectively assists market actors in finding their ways in the newly emerging structures of late capitalism, by cautiously discovering the constraints that these structures impose and the spaces for action that they open up. The second figure is that of the "Chicago boy" and the Thatcherite economist: the indoctrinator who imposes the ideology of commercialism on society and effectively establishes consent with the new orders of power and inequality. The third figure is that of the performative cocreator who is "entangled" in the symbolic construction of late capitalism and "talks to life" the market reality that so far existed only in the books. Protagonists of these three mainstream models have fought fierce battles; however, they have shared a common ground on which to fight.

newly emerging socioeconomic order (either the dominant power structure or the objective systemic frames of the emerging order). The second assumption has been that experts form a vanguard elite group with high prestige and competence to lead other actors and drive the marketization/mediatization of social fields. The key assumptions have creatively combined the traditions of functionalist theory and conflict theory, and, thus, allowed mainstream researchers standing on very different grounds to commonly construct the dominant image of market and media experts as the “heralds” of late modernity, representatives of a new “regime” of control and organization.

The mainstream approach neglects the role of collective speculation in the construction of late modern society and economy. It neglects the fact that the high-profile expert institutions represent only the tip of the mythical iceberg on which social actors making sense of media and markets stand. These elite institutions do not simply dictate the recipes for success for social actors—they are also captivated by the collective interpretive process in which societies make sense of markets and media. Indeed, the very role of high-profile market and media experts lies in forming into compelling evidence what is already “in the air.” It is by incorporating society’s common sense that their interpretive narratives can turn into effective social representations (Moscovici 2001) that are taken up by wider publics, and are distributed and gradually reinterpreted in a wide-scale collective endeavor.

The scholarly neglect of collective speculation has been apparent in the “neopopular” academic understanding of “popular media experts” (experts of PR, image making, marketing, polling, and communication) in politics. In the research of mediatized politics, the prime subject of my book, professional media experts have been generally depicted as an elite group of effective, high-level professionals who efficiently assist public actors in adapting themselves to the commercialized world of popular media (Negrine et al. 2007; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Mayhew 1997; Davis 2002). The work of PR agents, pollsters, political marketers, and consultants has been judged on a wide normative scale: they have been criticized as “invisible persuaders” (Michie 1998; Morris and Goldsworthy 2008; Sabato 1981; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999) and praised as self-reflexive “enablers” of democratic communication and will-formation (Scammell 1999; Lilleker and Lees-Marshment 2005). However, behind these normative disputes, there has been

a general agreement that professional media experts, for good or bad, have “clearly improved both the pace and the extent to which [political actors] can adopt to changes in their external environments” (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2007, 39). Scholars have commonly believed that this “growing army of specialists” (Stanyer 2007) has direct, undistorted access to the systemic, structural conditions of commercialized popular media: the challenges of mediatized competition, the imprinted preferences of the audience, the hurdles of multimedia complexity that need to be “managed,” and so on.

Mainstream approaches have neglected the fact that collective speculation on politics in the “popular media age” has not been driven by a vanguard group of effective professionals. If we want to understand this complex transformation, it will certainly not be enough to loath the spin doctor or praise the marketing expert, as scholarly researchers frequently did. Processes of mediatization have been driven by a much broader and more complex interpretive enterprise: a collective discourse in which all sorts of skilled and semi-skilled observers have been reflecting on late modern media and politics. These observers have not all been enthusiastic “advocates” seeking to impose the “popular media model” on politics. In public discourse about media and politics, a huge number of voices exist that are uninterested, or objectivist or critically engaged or light and frivolous, and which still do provide daily commentaries about how politics work under the pressures of commercialized popular media—and, thus, add their own part to the intersubjective (mis)understanding of the nature of marketized, mediatized politics.

In 2013, Hungarian online media was filled with critical references to a political campaign in which the government decreased household utility costs by 10 percent and praised itself for being the protector of the common people against multinational firms (heavily present as providers of energy, electricity, and media in Hungary). Public speculation about this campaign has been revolving around the unsubstantiated argument—promoted by some pollsters, journalists, and politicians—that the government could successfully broaden its voter base with these media-friendly, catchy, populist policy measures. It is self-evident that bloggers and online journalists speculating—mostly critically or cynically—about the populist political campaign have all contributed to the common production of knowledge about how populist supply and popular demand

meet on the market of mediatized politics. Seen from this point of view, media critics panicking over PR-based propaganda (or database marketing or spin doctors or media spectacles) were just as complicit as producers of media myths as were the propagandists whom they criticized. Critics and advocates of today's populist "media democracy" together produced our knowledge about the systemic rules of popular media. They have constructed together the mythical image of popular media rules to which public actors have sought to adapt their behavior.

This argument aims to suggest that the ongoing reflective efforts that marketers, bloggers, academics, and journalists deploy to make sense of popular media and politics are heavily interconnected. Behind their sharp disputes, the media interpreters have shared the key tropes of their interpretive discourse. Accordingly, when arguing that democratic politics has fallen hostage to a "speculative bubble," I do not refer to a few influential PR or public opinion research firms and consultancies, but to a wide-scale, plural, deep, and productive discourse, one in which all sorts of observers collide in collective speculation, that is, a stream of never-ending, irresolvable disputes, unfalsifiable predictions, mythical storytelling about popular media, popular tastes, and popular consumption—in a word, "the people." The very effects of collective speculation on democratic politics are to be found in the influence of this self-sustaining discourse which provides a structured framework for debate and maintains a commonly shared mythical ground on which all debating actors—paid and unpaid, critical and sympathetic, distanced and engaged—lay their feet.

Addressing the process of collective speculation on popular media (a general process that plays out at many fields only one of which is politics), this book argues that the expert, lay, and practitioner observers making sense of popular media, popular culture, and consumption (to be referred to as "popular media interpreters") have coalesced, in the past decades, into an autonomous interpretive sphere that is dominated by the "neopopular" discourse. This "popular media-interpreting sphere" has differentiated itself from the realm of media production and distribution, and today it produces the legitimate representations of the popular media system. The actors of this interpretive sphere are various media interpreters (experts in marketing, PR, consultancy and polling, TV pundits, a multitude of journalists and bloggers and social media users reflecting on popular media and media-

tized politics, and, last but not least, academic researchers who focus on popular media, marketing, communication, or popular culture) who today are entitled to inform media actors, communicators, and audiences about the systemic “logic” of popular media.

The discursive sphere of popular media interpretation will be grasped as a new power center in late modern society, and will be referred to as the “fifth estate” (in reference to the characterization of media as the “fourth estate”). So far, scholarly references to the “fifth estate” have been rather sporadic—but most of them have connected the term to segments of reflexive (semi-)professionals whose mission is to interpret or handle the complex late modern media environment. Accordingly, the term “fifth estate” has so far denoted either the TV pundits commenting on politicians’ media-tailored strategies (Sabato 1981), or the PR agents who manage the image of public actors in a hostile media environment (McNair 2004), or the regiment of self-made media critics in the blogosphere (Cooper 2006), or the related field of civil media watchdogs (Hayes 2008). In the following, I will suggest a more inclusive definition that grasps the “fifth estate” as a relatively coherent discursive sphere that weaves different expert institutions, paid and unpaid, skilled and semi-skilled media interpreters into a common web of meaning production about popular media.

The fifth estate has emerged in a process of differentiation where various media interpreters have joined forces—cross-cutting the institutionalized spheres to which they professionally belonged—and engaged in a common interpretive endeavor to make sense of market-driven popular media (see Chapter 2). In the last two or three decades, media experts in the fields of PR, marketing, academia, and media production have mutually monitored each other’s development, borrowed concrete concepts, data and theories from each other, and created narratives traveling all across their fields. In this process of mutual accommodation, media experts in separate fields have increasingly shared their discursive, interpretive tools. This is clearly a new development compared to the broadcast media age where interpretive exchanges between separate expert fields were rare. Today, marketing agencies, consultancies or media studies departments are still distinct apparatuses separated by (weakening) institutional borders, however, there is not much sense in regarding them in isolation from each other. Much like the particular apparatuses of the “civil sphere” (like law, mass media, public opinion

research and civil organizations; see Alexander and Smith 1993, Alexander 2006a), the institutions of media interpretation have coalesced into an analytically distinct, internally coherent discursive sphere in late modern society.

The discursive convergence, arguably, has been fostered by the deep contingencies of late modern society. Experts, observers, and scholars of popular media/culture/consumption in the last two or three decades have commonly felt that their intellectual position has been destabilized in the new age that has melted the crystallized structure of the media field and obliterated its established rules of conduct. The more complex and uncertain the media, political, and social environment has become, the more have various media observers found themselves on a shared platform: commonly inventing not only the formative “logics” of popular media but also those of late modern society.

As popular media interpreters have gathered in a shared discursive sphere of collective speculation, a two-sided, “speculative media system” has emerged. In this system, the discursive sphere of popular media interpretation gains independence both from media production/distribution and from public actors who use media to communicate with their audiences, and it accumulates a symbolic power to influence these fields on its own, by shaping their perception of popular media reality. In this two-sided system, which I propose to call a “speculative media system,” the fifth estate increasingly controls all available evidence about the circuits of production and consumption, demands and gratifications, media usages and media effects—that is, about the “fundamental” reality of popular media. The fifth estate harbors its own sensemaking codes, follows its inner interpretive logic which may or may not harmonize with the circuits of popular media that it is supposed to unravel.

The two-sidedness of today’s speculative media system is reminiscent of the way in which the financialization of capitalism separates conventional “primary” markets where producers and consumers of commodities connect from a growing realm of “secondary” markets where speculators reflect on the prospects of primary markets and their reflections may follow a self-driven, self-referential dynamics. Following this parallel, the fifth estate will be conceived of as a “secondary sphere” that is detached from the “primary sphere” where the cultural circuits of media(tized) performance, reception, production, distribu-

tion, and consumption take place. Accordingly, the “speculative media system” envisioned in this book will be conceived of as a deeply schizophrenic conglomerate of two autonomous spheres that do not necessarily coincide with the other. The parallel between the fifth estate as a secondary sphere and finance as a secondary market will be deployed in in section 1.5. below and in the concluding chapter of the book.

1.4. The Mediatization of Politics

This book interprets the “mediatization of politics” as its gradual transformation by the neopopular discourse of the fifth estate. This transformative power stems from the fact that the fifth estate has been established as a trusted system of intermediation between state and citizen: its most prominent expert representatives have widely been regarded as effective substitutes of the mass parties that once had channeled popular will into politics. However, this new intermediation system is deeply flawed and is responsible for the responsivity crisis crippling late modern democracy. Its main protagonists, popular media experts, could not really “connect” the popular audience-voter; instead, they weaved self-justifying myths about “the popular.” These myths could be established as collective representations since they have been based on our societies’ mythical common sense. Harboring and amplifying common mythmaking, the fifth estate has derailed and destabilized the systemic processes of mediatization and popularization which it has been supposed to seamlessly assist and advocate.

Paradoxically enough, the irresponsive and speculative system of late modern politics was originally installed as a solution to the responsivity deficit of its “high modern” twentieth-century predecessor, mass party-based representative democracy. It is common knowledge today that the political sphere has been deeply transformed with the arrival of late modernity. This reconfiguration may well be described as a process of transition in which the system of “mass party-based representative democracy” gives way to that of “mediatized populist democracy” (Ankersmit 2002; Mair 2002). The past system of representative democracy was based on class representation and voters’ mass-scale feelings of belonging to the party representing their social class. In the twentieth century, politics has basically meant the representation of

(class or group) interests through mass parties embedded in civil society. This model, however, started to be dismantled in the 1970s, due to the dissolving of citizens' mass-scale participation in parties and related civil institutions (like the party, the labor movement, the church, or philanthropic organizations).¹¹ A new, "mediatized" political system started to take shape, the actors of which hoped to connect and control their constituencies through popular media channels, rather than (increasingly emptying) party infrastructures. Gradually, class-based representative politics has been replaced by a new system of "mediatized populist democracy" that is devoid of reference to particular social groups. In the new system, parties are disembedded from civil society, and the main stake of their competition is to decide who best serves the wants and the needs of "the people" in general. In today's "mediatized populist democracy," the particularistic principle of political representation (namely the representation of group interests and group values) is subsumed to the universalistic principles of popular sovereignty and popular interest (what "the people" want, and what "the people" need).

The emerging political system, in which mediatized campaigns are meant to mediate between the state and "the people," instead of mass parties mediating between the state and a class, is necessarily "populist" in nature: "populist democracy may be understood as popular democracy without [mass] parties" (Mair 2002, 91). In such a context, the prime reference point of politics is no longer particular social groups the members of which would find their natural representatives in their political parties, but the universal category of "the people," understood as the conglomerate of popular media audiences. Since in the new political system, actors have no other anchor point than the imaginary figure of "the people," they are all inevitably bound

¹¹ The crisis of belonging has too often and prematurely attributed to the dissolution of social classes. By contrast, what has been dissolved instead of classes is the self-evident sense of group membership. It is arguably this crisis of belonging that corrodes the political system, both in those countries, like the United States, where mass political participation had not been based on class struggle, and in those (mostly European) countries where mass parties have represented social classes in the past, but could not renew this alliance with newer generations who have refused to join class-based parties even if their objective social status still kept many of them in the "class" of their parents or grandparents.

to follow populist strategies (see McGuigan 1992). This, of course, by no means leads to a homogenizing mass propaganda; on the contrary, “the people” in late modern democracy is envisioned as a fragmented and plural conglomerate rather than a pure and coherent entity. As I will show in Chapter 2, mediatized populist democracy has emerged in the last decades exactly because it has seemed to better suit the individualized, pluralized settings of late capitalist middle-class society where citizens do not feel themselves to self-evidently “belong” to class-based political organizations.

The two political systems have fostered entirely different mechanisms of intermediation between state and citizen. In the past age of high modernity, the system of representative democracy has maintained mass parties with a pyramidal infrastructure that allowed for a dense two-way information flow between the party center and local electorates. The party itself worked, to use a somewhat incorrect metaphor, as a permanent and interactive survey machine that allocated the will of the electorate and channeled it to the party center. This allocation process worked indirectly, through the filters of elected party representatives placed hierarchically at the intermediate levels of the party administration. As mass parties have collapsed in the late modern age since people lost their sense of belonging to them, the allocation mechanism could not be sustained. New players have emerged and claimed to reveal people’s needs and expectations more sensitively than old-style party officials did in their heyday. These new players—PR and marketing experts, pollsters, political consultants—have promised to efficiently communicate with voters, and they have been gradually elevated into the very heart of the political process. Elected party representatives have stepped down as prime mediators between state and society, passing over their mediating role to a new class of “cultural intermediaries” (see Bourdieu, etc.). As Bernard Manin has noted in his analysis of mediatized populist democracy: “[A] new elite of experts in communication has replaced the political activist and the party bureaucrat. Audience democracy is the rule of the *media expert*” (1997, 220).¹²

¹² It is important to note that he has originally used the term “*démocratie de l’opinion*,” which has been translated to English as “audience democracy.”

In the last decades, the representative infrastructure of the mass party has given way to the late modern configuration of populist democracy, in which the task of monitoring and serving the popular will is increasingly outsourced from representative institutions to external agencies. These professional agencies have promised to give direct access to the very needs and wants of politicians' fickle, elusive, media-consuming constituencies. These expert agencies have suggested that after the collapse of the mass party, media management, branding, marketing, and polling serve as the key tools of reaching out to the popular electorate. In the system of populist democracy, the fifth estate has taken the role of the mass party as the prime mediator between the state and the citizen.

Although there are good reasons to refuse fifth estate experts' self-projected image as transparent, effective mediators between the state and the consumer-citizen, scholarly media research has approved this image. Scholars have depicted these professionals as masters of a new system that uses new tools to channel voter preferences into the political field. Scholars have seen fifth estate experts as effective mediating agents who—for good or bad—competently allocate information about the affinities of media-using voters and efficiently engineer politicians' popular success, by monitoring, understanding, modeling, gratifying, and targeting their media-consuming constituencies. Established scholarly narratives have commonly argued that high-profile experts successfully assisted political actors in adapting the political field to the systemic imperatives of the popular media system (for reviews, see Meyer 2002; Brants and Van Praag 2006; Lundby 2009, Kriesi 2013).

The adaptive process has been commonly grasped as the “mediatization” of politics. In this process, the mainstream argument has suggested that

the structures, organization and strategies of politics are increasingly adapting themselves to late capitalist popular media. This shift is manifested in everything from the strategic targeting of messages for specific audience niches to the rhetoric of press conferences and to the conscious adaptation of public discourse to sound bites of suitable length and visuals with dramatic impact. (Dahlgren 2001, 84)

The “adaptation” has commonly been understood as a systemic necessity, still, less a process of passive self-submission than one in which politics is a proactive agent, creatively adopting, appropriating, and interiorizing the systemic rules of mediatized competition (Axford and Huggins 2001; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Negrine et al. 2007). The rules of media have widely been thought to coalesce into a relatively coherent, systemic “media logic” (Altheide and Snow 1979), a set of objective imperatives that define how popular audiences can be attracted and gratified in a commercialized, cluttered, competitive media system. Importantly, these systemic imperatives have been associated not only with popular media, but also, at a more general level, with the late capitalist system of cultural production in which popular media plays an integral role. Seen from such a viewpoint, the “adaptation” of politics to popular media has been seen as a universal process in which the political system appropriates, to use an old formula, the “cultural logic of late capitalism” (Jameson 1991). Competing scholarly approaches to mediatized politics have found their main mission in assessing the possible dangers and benefits that public actors’ adaptation to the logic of popular media and late capitalism may bring to democracy.

The genesis story of mediatized populist democracy, canonized by mainstream scholarly research, neglects the formative role that collective speculation on popular media fulfills in today’s politics. In light of the speculative distortions of collective media interpretation, it would be illusory to assume that public actors have had an undistorted, direct vision about the preferences of popular media audiences and the systemic media imperatives they have tried to adapt themselves to. Accordingly, the systemic media “imperatives” to which public actors have adapted themselves need to be rethought as Durkheimian collective representations in action: mythical images that have gained autonomy from the group that produced them and thus have a sovereign force to orient actors in a contingent cultural environment.

The mediatization of politics, my book argues, has not been driven by a directly apprehensible, systemic media logic but by the fifth estate’s speculative discourse that has defined for actors what media logic is. The possibility that the concepts, measurement techniques, indices, and narratives used in media interpretation may be systematically biased discursive artifacts has escaped mainstream scholarly research. By contrast,

the following analysis of the “popular media bubble” in this book will directly address the systematic interpretive biases (mental burdens, stereotypes, simplifications) that have been encoded into the mediatization of politics from the beginning and diverted the so-called “adaptation” of public actors to the popular media system. Far from enabling public actors to seamlessly adapt themselves to popular media, I will argue, fifth estate experts have disoriented public actors and pushed them into inadequate, systematically distorted “adaptive” strategies.¹³ The mediatization of politics, accordingly, has less to be grasped as a process of systemic adaptation, than one of systematic maladaptation, being driven by a self-enclosed, self-justifying speculative discourse.

Unfortunately, critical media and political theory has omitted to reckon collective mythmaking and speculation among the central “structural roots” of today’s “crisis of public communication” (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 221).

1.5. Liquidity and Collective Speculation in Late Modern Society

In line with the collective belief that free markets and popular media bring to life more flexible and more effective mechanisms of both individual agency and social control, a great number of social and

¹³ In contrast to this mainstream approach, my book argues that, paradoxically, the larger the resources public actors have allocated to polling, marketing, and consultancy, the more they have exposed themselves to these apparatuses’ stereotyped myths about popular media. Paradoxically, the more efforts public actors have invested into “reflexively” understanding and exploiting popular media, the less susceptible they have become to those hidden realms of the media universe that have been understressed by neopopular institutions. Following the hints of these apparatuses, public actors have developed one-sided views about popular media and politics, and consequently, it is arguable that their strategies to control these fields have been randomly successful or defective. However, even when reflecting about their missteps, and even in their efforts to avoid future failures, public actors have tended to invest more trust and money into the same interpretive apparatuses that had led them astray.

economic fields have been “marketized” and “mediatized” in the last decades. This means that, increasingly, market-driven and media-driven forms of coordination and competition have taken the place of more conventional forms of behavior at various fields. Of all these fields, finance and politics have clearly stood out, for it is here that the liquidization processes have brought the deepest and most ambiguous changes, by relieving finance and politics from their alleged “rigidities” and rearranging them according to the “liquid” logic of free markets and popular media.

“Liquidity” is a key organizing principle in late modern society and economy, and it is closely related to the feedback crisis referred to so far as “collective speculation” in the fields of marketized finance and mediatized politics.¹⁴ Following and broadening André Orléan’s inspiring theory, I propose to grasp late modern liquidization (the flexible treatment of growing complexity) and collective speculation (actors’ common flight into imitation and herding) as two sides of the same coin: one does not exist without the other (Orléan 2014, especially chapters 2, 3 and 7). The general “liquidization” of institutions has unleashed processes of collective speculation in various spheres of late capitalist economy and late modern society, and the process of speculation has intensified the further liquidization of social fields. Processes of liquidization and collective speculation have incited together the foundational transformations in today’s economy, politics, and society. The liquidization of institutions and the speculative production of collective belief are to be seen as key structural phenomena that expand far beyond finance or politics, even if their corrosive force has played out the most apparently on these two fields.

The transformation of finance from a regulated bureaucratic field to an unregulated market may well be read as a liquidization process. As the sphere of finance has been intensely marketized, all forms of capital have been made maximally liquid and tradable, freely investable and reinvestable at any moment (see Orléan 2014).¹⁵ The liquidiza-

¹⁴ For a social theory of liquidity, see Bauman 2000; for a theory of social control in a liquid age, see Bauman and Lyon 2013; and for a theory of liquidity and speculation in late capitalist finance, see Orléan 2014.

¹⁵ Key to the marketization of finance has been the process of “securitization,” that I shortly present here following the argument of Orléan (2014, 259–61).

tion of finance has liberated capital from the rule of the allegedly rigid and overregulated commercial bank and investment bank which, in the past, decided on their own to whom to lend money and to whom to sell bonds, with what conditions, and for what price. The marketization and commodification of finance has lifted these burdens and led to the rise of liquid financial markets where crowds of financial investors lend their money to borrowers, they are free to redraw and reinvest their capital at any moment, and all investors play the role of buyer and seller at the same time. The overall liquidization of formerly clear boundaries between institutions (commercial bank vs. investment bank), between economic roles (buyer vs. seller, lender vs. borrower), and capital (liquid vs. illiquid) has clearly been moved by utopian convictions, according to which “the price mechanism should . . . be unimpeded in allocating funds for productive uses in real economy.” This idea of “market liquidity, because it allows capital to be rapidly invested wherever profitable opportunities appear, was unrivaled” (Orléan 2014, 59). The liquidization of finance has been thought to increase not only the efficiency of capital investment, but also its safety, since in the new system the task of risk assessment has been assigned to the collective intelligence of investors who have been enabled to freely diversify their portfolio, and thus let risk of lending spread all over the market. In April 2006, the IMF noted: “There is growing recognition that the dispersion of credit risk by banks to a broader and more diverse group of investors, rather than warehousing such risks on their balance sheets,

Securitization has been meant to liberate lending from the rigid burdens imposed by the tight regulation of commercial and investment banking. During the decades of regulated banking, bank loans and mortgages were objects of a private contract between the creditor bank and the debtor. Loans, thus, were immobile forms of capital, “illiquid and immune to market valuation.” The deregulation of banking, however, has allowed banks to “liquidize” this capital. In the process of securitization, the commercial bank has bundled vast numbers of its prime and subprime loans into a pool, transferred this pool to an investment bank that has chunked it into bonds, and sold these bonds to investors. In this “pooling operation that converts illiquid loans into tradeable assets” (261), lending has ceased to be the singular act of a particular bank, and become the object the collective judgment of a myriad of investors. Immobile, illiquid loans and bonds have been transformed into liquid financial assets that are freely negotiable and tradeable at the financial market.

has helped to make the banking and overall financial system more resilient” (IMF 2006, 51; quoted in MacKenzie 2011).

Meanwhile, the sphere of politics has been “liquidized” (mediatized) with no less intensity: political actors have increasingly tried to connect with their electorates through popular media channels, mediatized images, targeted messages, PR campaigns, and focus groups. These liquid instruments of “popular connection” have been praised for allowing for a more effective electoral mobilization and a more genuine service of voters’ needs than the obsolete, rigid infrastructure of the class-based mass party that had shaped politics in the past. The same instruments of PR, image making, and marketing have of course also been blamed for their dark powers. The liquidization process gave birth to the constellation of “mediatized populist democracy,” a speculative system which is the prime target of this book’s critical analysis.

The “marketization of finance” and the “mediatization of politics” have been the most apparent cases bringing to light the inner paradox of liquidization, namely that it triggers new forms of collective speculation that betray the original promise of establishing more flexible and effective coordination mechanisms. In approaching the paradoxical intimacy between liquid modernity and collective speculation, let us start from the fact that the processes of marketization and mediatization, these formative forces of “liquid modernity,” tend to create fluid settings which change too quickly to be intelligible for actors. The link between fluidity and disorientation¹⁶ is key, indeed, to a liquidized society, where, as Zygmunt Bauman has put it, “the passage from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ modernity . . . confront[s] individuals with a series of challenges never before encountered. Social forms and institutions no longer have enough time to solidify and cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions” (Bauman 2007, cover text). It is arguable, then, that for the politician and the investor equally, the liquidization of political and financial institutions has created an uncertain environment where profit opportunities are high but the appropriate rules of behavior are puzzlingly opaque—especially in comparison to the previous, “high modern” era of finance and politics, when the more rigid

¹⁶ The possibility that fluid institutional settings may disorient actors is essential indeed, for this friction is what lies at the very heart of the chronic secession between “fundamentals” and “speculating” actors, between “system” and its “interpretation” that my book will seek to unravel in the sphere of politics.

institutions of the bank and the mass party demarcated more intelligible, more predictable practices of capital investment and electoral representation.

The apparent dissolution of familiar institutional structures in the process of liquidization has increased the value of collective beliefs that could serve as orienting anchors in the menacingly liquid settings of the emerging new world. As growing liquidity in finance, politics, and other fields has nurtured a sense of disorientation and uncertainty, actors became hungry for meaningful interpretive narratives that made sense of the newly emerging liquid systems, their key rules and constraints. Thus, the opening of new, liquid spaces for action in late modern society has immediately created new dependencies on interpretive narratives which offered familiar, meaningful keys to the unfolding world (these narratives will be referred to later as “new age theories”). The most plausible explanations have quickly reached the status of commonsensical collective belief. They have rapidly, contagiously spread across various interpretive fields—national and global, elite and civilian—and shaped the imagination and behavior of all sorts of actors. A new dominance of overhyped, contagious “collective representations” has sprung from actors’ common efforts to make sense of their liquid, marketized, and mediatized environment.

As disoriented actors have turned to the sphere of collective beliefs for rescue from uncertainty, as they have commonly tried to read out the “new rules” of their liquid world from the collective wisdom of other actors, they have laid the bed for speculative thinking. The most characteristic trait of speculative thinking in late modern society is that it rejects restraining itself to “fundamental” reality (seen as too messy to be directly knowable for the individual observer) and instead focuses on the way this reality is mirrored in the collective intelligence of a myriad of other actors. Accordingly, the investor’s considerations of where to invest money on the liquid financial market have been transformed into a speculation over where “the markets” themselves (the speculating collective as a whole) would invest their money.¹⁷ In a similar way, the politician’s dilemma of how to connect with her

¹⁷ “[M]embers of capitalist economies almost invariably think of ‘the market’ as a third-person collective agent, to which first-person agents, such as ‘We the investors,’ respond but do not necessarily identify with” (Lee and LiPuma 2002, 196).

popular media-using constituencies has been transformed into speculative thinking on “what is popular,” what has made other actors “popular.” The switch in actors’ minds—from the wish to directly know “fundamental” reality to a new wish to get a better grasp of fundamentals from their reflection in all actors’ collective experience—marks a definitive step toward collective speculation and the self-referential virtual universe that it maintains.

The self-referential mechanism of collective speculation has unleashed waves of collective herd behavior at various fields. This is understandable: as actors of liquidized fields desperately seek escape from their menacingly uncertain position, once a plausible solution to make material or symbolic profits emerges in collective consciousness, they run in hordes to exploit it. This has been typical to actors of various fields in late modern society: the politician who would apply any populist tactic that made another politician popular, the investor of global financial markets who buys what everybody else is buying, the journalist who is “running with the pack” and covers what everybody else is covering (Liebes and Blum-Kulka 2004¹⁸), the record company that allocates all its advertising budget on exploiting short-term fashions that its competitors also seek to maximally exploit (Anand and Peterson 2000). In each case, the actors’ rush to jump on the bandwagon is propelled by collective representations of success in liquid conditions.

Speculative reason starts where concerns with reality are abandoned for the sake of concerns with collective wisdom about reality. This is not *a priori* irrational at all (see Orléan 2014). In the liquid conditions we live in, it is reasonable to expect that a more solid ground can be gained from collective intelligence than from individual intelligence. This is reasonable, however, only when the individual judgments aggregated into collective intelligence are sufficiently divergent. By contrast, collective judgment may be fatally flawed if the individual judgments that it aggregates are systematically biased in the same direction.

If this is the case, the speculative affinity to follow collective intelligence only multiplies the flaws of individual thinking, and actors

¹⁸ See also the “feeding frenzies” of Sabato (1991) or the self-inflating media hype identified by Vasterman (2005).

mutually spiral themselves into blowing self-propelled, self-referential “bubbles.” According to common economic jargon, bubbles are inflated when experts and actors commonly and systematically misinterpret the structural “fundamentals” of a market and follow their mistaken hints in a collective fervor. The recent bubbles in the financial and housing markets exemplify the general tendency among today’s market actors to commonly follow the same biased heuristics in their hunt for profit (Akerlof and Shiller 2009),¹⁹ to blind themselves to real-world markets, and to flee into an imagined, virtual market reality. Bubbles, collective misunderstandings, are anomalies of late modern reflexivity (Soros 2009): they grow when the interpretive accounts reflecting on market economy lose their ability to self-reflexively correct themselves, and coalesce into a self-referential, labyrinthine universe that distances itself from market reality. It is a well-documented fact that the scale and scope of financial bubbles have intensified in late capitalism (Stiglitz 2010a; Soros 2009)—underlying the link between speculation and liquidization.

The close link between reflexive appropriation and collective self-delusion, as my book hopefully demonstrates, does exist and destabilizes the intersubjective construction of the “new age” in which we live. In the research of finance and the late capitalist economy it has widely been argued that bubbles, collective misunderstandings of economic “fundamentals,” have been inflated by mythical “new age” theories (Shiller 2005; Brenner 2006; Klein 2007; Akerlof and Shiller 2009; Soros 2009; Orléan 2014) that actors have collectively invented in their efforts to reflexively appropriate the “new rules” of a quickly transforming world. Thus, new age theories should be treated with caution, since “bubbles”—misleading and self-defeating collective representa-

¹⁹ This common rush has been incited by widely held “success stories” that narrated how innovative actors may be able to realize high profits with minimal risk. These plausible success stories have powerfully influenced market actors. In the first place, they have appeased actors’ worries that today’s economic environment is too messy to be successfully controlled. By creating such a confident atmosphere, mythical stories about the “new rules” of success have incited highly conformist adaptive strategies among market actors, who, paradoxically enough, have hoped to make individual profits by exploiting the “golden rules” of profit making that all actors have been trying to exploit.

tions of reality—might emerge when the actors and experts in a field start speculating about the dawn of a “new age” and the “new rules” that it sets.

Actors of liquid capitalism/modernity may believe that they have entered a “new age,” however, what seems to have established itself instead is ubiquitous speculation about the “new age”—a “new age of new age theories,” so to say. Speculation on the new age, due to its permanent presence, has grown into a structural factor that has a sovereign force to shape the thoughts and actions of actors in late modern society. The symbolic force of collective speculation reveals itself in actors’ apparent affinity to retreat from reality and enclose themselves into bubblelike, self-propelled “enclaves” of collective misapprehension. Collective speculation, as it solidifies into a structural factor of late modern society, manifests the dark side of liquid modernity which confronts individual actors with challenges they are not able to meet. While the prime commandment of liquidity would require actors “to be flexible and adaptable—to be constantly ready and willing to change tactics at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability” (Bauman 2000, 7), collectively pursued speculative discourses are rigid and sticky, they offer commonsensical, ready-made solutions to new and complex problems. This argument raises a crucial question regarding the symbolic or discursive resources collective speculation feeds upon. What is the source of collective beliefs in late modernity when established institutions are constantly challenged and liquefied, and lose their orienting power? What is the commonly accepted ground of the “new age theories” that feed collective speculation?

To answer these questions, we need to keep in mind the structural imbalances of social change (that tend to be widely neglected and undertheorized, as I will argue in detail when analyzing the takeover of speculative reason in media and politics in Chapter 2). By the structural imbalances of change I mean that the systemic crises triggering change in society tend to affect institutions more directly and more deeply than cultural traditions, which are more resilient and less open to change. Accordingly, I propose to start from the reasonable point that the liquidization of late modern society has primarily affected its institutions, while its dominant interpretive traditions have much less been “liquidized.” Familiar interpretive tropes have remained as

seemingly “solid” anchors to rely upon in the menacing conditions of liquidity. In consequence, actors have been less urged to develop “flexible” and “self-reflexive” individual strategies than theorists of second modernity have suggested. Instead, they often have reacted to liquidization by commonly drawing back to their trusted interpretive traditions, the most plausible tropes of which they have commonly retailed and imposed on the unfolding new world. The most plausible and trusted tropes of these inherited—“modernist”—interpretive traditions have solidified into “collective representations” and fed collective speculation. The liquidization of institutional structures in late modern society has triggered a collective endeavor to achieve “solidity” in a liquidized world, by the means of retailing old, “modernist” interpretive traditions. This collective reaction to uncertainty and liquidity has led to the solidification of new structures of neo-orthodox, neomodern speculation.

1.6. Structural Paradoxes in the Making of the “New Age”

The newly emerging discursive fields or “enclaves” of collective speculation in finance and politics—and arguably in many other fields—embody the key structural paradox of liquid modernity. Paradoxically, today, when old structures have widely been thought to fade—the party-based institutional structure of politics to dissolve into media-based mobilization, the institutional structure of Fordism to dissolve into the flexible and networked mechanisms of project-based production, the class structure of society to dissolve into a kaleidoscope of lifestyle tribes and consumer milieus, the governance structure of the state to dissolve into networked and privatized governance, conventional “structures of feeling” to dissolve into individualized identities, the structured media flow to dissolve into a chaotic multimedia torrent—the inherited interpretive traditions of society have fed the rise of new, “bubblelike” symbolic structures of collective speculation. These hardly avoidable, speculative sensemaking “structures” dominate the collective understanding of social life after the alleged collapse of structures.

The paradoxical fact that actors of late modern society have commonly solidified their old interpretive tropes in their efforts to manage their new liquid world encloses us, citizens of late modern democracy,

into hardly escapable circularities. The more interpretive resources we invest in holding a precise mirror to the new realities of our age, the more it is our orthodox selves whom we see reflected in the mirror. We see new and chaotic tendencies emerging, but we use our old keys to unravel their secrets. We try to model the “new rules of the new age” with interpretive tools we are familiar with, but these tools may fool us. It is not that we would neglect the imperfection of our reflexive instruments. We know our tools are distorted, but we also keep working with them in lack of time to experiment with new ones. Such an opportunism is understandable. However, in uncertain times, when opportunistic experts in academia and in industry produce all-too-familiar “new age theories” abundantly, the in-built biases of these neo-orthodox reflexive instruments may immensely aggrandize themselves. Today, whole armies of professionals fight for the credit of understanding our times. They offer us immediately plausible, well-tailored, utopian (or dystopian) stories about the new rules of our age—stories that enchant us because they are built from elements with which we are familiar. These abundantly flowing stories promise to open a new window to a new age, but in fact they enclose their tellers and listeners into an echo chamber where nothing disturbs the familiar voice of well-established mythical narratives inherited from the past.

This brings us to a further paradox of liquid modernity that will be dealt with in great detail in this book: namely the fact that a puzzling gap seems to open between the newly invented world and the symbolic means of its invention. The asymmetry between neo-orthodox knowledge and the new age that it creates leads to chaotic, unexpected, counterintuitive outcomes. The counterproductive effects of liquidization and speculation have nowhere been more manifest than in the sphere of marketized finance, where the dominant myth of “efficient markets” triggered the rise of newer and even more complex financial assets, without allowing for the proper assessment of the risk they have entailed. Although the liquidization of capital has promised to spread the risk of lending over the whole financial market and thus making capital investment more effective, what happened in fact was the very opposite: “risk was being accumulated, not dispersed, and the financial system was growing more fragile, not more resilient” (MacKenzie 2011). Similarly chaotic results have emerged from the adaptation of politics to popular media. These disorienting outcomes explain the

frustrated stance of today's political actors, who see well that in the quickly changing popular media system newer and newer opportunities open for "connecting" with their electorates, and still they are chronically unable to establish this "popular connection," to descend from the alienated clouds of the political sphere, that has never been as unpopular as it is today, after its alleged "adaptation" to popular media and audiences.

Indeed, a key paradox of our "new age" is that it has been invented by "old" discourses, that actors have tried to grasp its "newness" by retailoring long-established, orthodox interpretive tropes. All this forecasts an inevitable disharmony to prevail between the discursive invention of the "new age" and the new institutional configurations that emerge in its footsteps. In the following, the troubling disharmony will be grasped as the "structural imbalance of systemic change." Chapter 2 will address the historic unfolding of this imbalance in the last decades, and Chapter 3 will offer a theory of it. These historical and theoretical endeavors will allow us to fully cope with the troubling fact that today's "new age" has been invented by "neo-orthodox" discourses that, being bound to old interpretive traditions, have necessarily lagged behind the new, and too often fallacious, coordinating mechanisms that have been implemented in their name.

Chapter 2

The Rise of the Fifth Estate

This chapter deals with the institutional ramifications of a fundamental paradox of “mediatized” society and politics. The paradox is that the popular media field that is commonly regarded as the key “obligatory passing point” (Couldry 2000, 47) to connect and control late modern society has saturated this society to such an extent that it has grown just as complex and chaotic as the society it promises to control. Today, popular media could hardly be regarded as channels or (biased or transparent) windows to society—in a way, they “are” themselves society. Of course, they are still, and increasingly, regarded as key tools to control society, however, these tools of control are just as complex as is their controlled object, and thus, require constant interpretation themselves. In consequence, we need to grasp the structural process of mediatization as a schizophrenic transformation that parallelly amplifies both sides of the above paradoxical equation: it incites new circuits of “popular connection and control” and a new interpretive discourse dealing with the chaotic complexity inherent to these circuits.

The mediatization of late modern society needs thus to be rethought as a deeply schizophrenic process, a compound of two parallel transformations that are not identical: the rise of a new popular media ecology (new “popular” media channels, genres, technologies, media usages) on the one hand, and that of a new, “neopopular” discursive sphere, on the other, the “fifth estate,” that makes sense of these emerging realities and plays a similar role to financial markets (“secondary markets”) that are

supposed to aggregate information on real (“primary”) markets.¹ Due to the autonomization of the fifth estate in the last few decades, a two-sided media system has emerged that I call a “speculative media system.” Since the speculative media system is the conglomerate of two autonomous spheres—a “primary” sphere of production/distribution/consumption and a “secondary” sphere of interpretation—it needs to be conceived of as a schizophrenic system that is driven by potentially incongruent “logics” which do not necessarily coincide with each other.

Such a schizophrenic model of mediatization is alien to standard approaches which have attributed a coherent operational logic to the “popular” media system. According to mainstream scholarly theory, the popular media system has been constituted in a relatively coherent process in which new technologies, regulations, media institutions and genres have been invented and used by innovative media entrepreneurs, communicators, and experts who have instinctively “smelled out” the new rules of the media game in the emerging late modern era. Scholarly mainstreams have tended to postulate a harmony between the emerging media system (institutions, services) and the emerging interpretive tools (concepts, data aggregation methods, targeting technologies, ideological explanations) that make sense of it and maintain and create it. The idea of inner coherence has informed the standard scholarly genesis narrative, according to which the “popular media system” has emancipated itself from state control and established itself as a new, “autonomous power center” (Swanson and Mancini 1996, 15) that bends all social fields, among them politics, to its own operational logic in the process of “mediatization.”

¹ With its symbolic power to aggregate information and to shape common knowledge about the “new rules” of behavior in the popular media realm, the fifth estate has grown to a sovereign power center in late modern society. In the late modern media system, the fifth estate increasingly controls all available evidence about the “fundamental” circuits of media production and consumption, demands and gratifications, media usages and media effects. This symbolic power has allowed the fifth estate to grow independent from media production, journalism, and politics and to influence these fields by imposing on them its own neopopular interpretive logic. Increasingly, the spheres of media production, commodity production, news production, and politics have become dependent on the orienting information provided by the fifth estate.

This book proposes to grasp mediatization as a schizophrenic process in which actors of the fifth estate have partly envisioned and partly created new institutional structures that do not comply with their neopopular interpretive frames. To address these inner ambiguities, it is not enough to address the autonomization of media institutions, for it is equally important to grasp how the “secondary sphere” of the fifth estate gets autonomous parallelly with (or even before) these very media institutions. Such a “parallel autonomization” approach offers a more nuanced perspective than the mainstream narrative on the “autonomization of the popular media system,” which tends to sideline the structural imbalances of systemic change: the fact that the transformations of people, institutions, and thought patterns may follow divergent trajectories. It is vital to consider the inner imbalances of structural change—and not only in the more banal sense that quickly changing institutional and technological infrastructures may coexist with more resilient, habitual value and thought systems, but also in the less self-evident sense that resilient, old thought patterns may create new, complex, uncertain institutional realities they cannot catch up with (as it has clearly been the case with the dominant “neomodern” myths on the “Free Market age” or the “Popular Media age” and the chaotically complex reality of marketized and mediatized society).²

² The imbalances of structural change have not been unknown, of course, in broader intellectual discourse; however, in the pre-2008 era, these imbalances have mostly been imagined in the form of conflicts between enlightened elites urging for structural reforms (or engaging in new innovations) and reluctant societies lagging behind the reformist-innovative *crème*. This trope has informed, for example, the oft-quoted passage of Ralf Dahrendorf, who famously forecasted in 1990 that for postcommunist countries, “it will take six months to reform the political systems, six years to change the economic systems, and sixty years to effect a revolution in the peoples’ hearts and minds” (Dahrendorf 1990, 42). This twenty-five-year-old *bon mot*, in the age of a seemingly “triumphant” capitalism, has represented the modernizer’s worries about how some “undeveloped” societies will lag behind the frames of democratic capitalism they have to adopt.

The modernizer’s discourse is hard to maintain in today’s “age of chaos” when the transformed economic and political systems turn out to work dysfunctionally. In the post-2008 world, the structural imbalances of change reveal themselves at the plane of elites. Today, it is the reformist elites who seem to lag behind the highly uncertain socioeconomic structures they them-

In the first step, the chapter identifies the discursive resources of the fifth estate that allowed it to emerge as a self-justifying sphere. I will start by pointing out two modernist discursive tropes: the first being that of “popular resonance” (or popular connection), the second being that of people’s “availability.” The two tropes represent two different modernist principles and institutional-discursive infrastructures of social control. The long-dominant trope of “availability” has embodied the high modern idea of bureaucratic control, suggesting that people can be connected and controlled by the pyramidal infrastructures of high modern bureaucratic institutions. The latter will be referred to as the “big institutions” of high modernity, the most important of which for us are the Fordist enterprise, the mass party and trade union, mass entertainment media and elite news organizations. These institutions maintained large pyramidal infrastructures which could integrate and control the population. Their self-understanding, and inner operational logic, was based on the key interpretive trope of “availability,” depicting the people as clients—available, loyal, mobilizable, educable clients. By contrast, the alternative trope of “popular resonance” has embodied the alleged logic of “liquid control,” according to which people are elusive individuals who can be connected and controlled uniquely by impulses they find immediately “resonant” with their personal lives. The idea of resonance-based control was represented by a long subordinate institutional-discursive apparatus, composed of various experts of marketing, advertising, PR and image making and polling who, in the high modern age, primarily thought of the people as “audience-consumers” who are selective and elusive but also conformist and simple minded.

In the past age of “high” modernity, both principles played an important role in the established infrastructures of social control. Hegemonic “big institutions” had been well aware that people were far less “available” for them than they wanted, and, thus, they did not entirely reject the alternative tools of “popular resonance”-based control.

selves have unintentionally created. Now we see that the new models of “liquid control” elites have experimented with in the pre-2008 era have been shaped by “neo-orthodox” thought patterns that could not catch up with the very complexity and uncertainty of the new world that has emerged in the footsteps of reformist experiments.

Instead, they have tried to combine the ideas and practices of popular resonance making, although in a subordinate form, with their own bureaucratic operational logic. High modern big institutions maintained an unequal balance between the “availability”-based and “popular resonance”-based forms of control, with the primacy of the former.

The most important point of this chapter is that the victory of “popular resonance” over “availability” in the last decades has not been a paradigm shift from one conceptual frame to another, but the breaking of the former balance between the two principles of control, and the excessive absolutization of one at the expense of the other.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the abilities and credentials of big institutions to connect and control the population have been increasingly undermined, and, in parallel, the idea of availability has been discredited as an effective principle of social control. The crisis of big institutions has weakened their ability to balance out the two hardly compatible principles of control. Their new leadership tried to reestablish their waning control over the population with the tools of popular resonance making. Thus, the so far subordinate modernist idea of popular resonance broke out of its inferior position and has been established as the ultimate principle of liquid control in late modernity. Around the tropes of popular resonance and connection, a speculative neopopular discourse has emerged, which could effectively expand and increase the sophistication of the modernist tropes, but has not opened new horizons for understanding the new age.

The proposed approach derives the collective invention of the popular media age from the “breaking loose” of the (so far) subordinate modernist principle of popular resonance and allows for a key recognition, namely, that the experts of popular resonance can increasingly act free of any external control by the big institutions. In the high modern era, when big institutions maintained a balance between availability (as a superior model of control) and resonance (as its inferior supplement), leaders of institutions could act as sovereign customers of the information provided by the experts of popular resonance. They could compare the reports of PR and marketing managers with the intelligence produced by professionals of their own infrastructures about the performance of their institutions. However, when big institutions could not control the population by their own means, they also lost the grounds on which to judge the effectiveness of resonance-based

control. They had to rely on popular media experts not only in implementing campaigns, etc., but also in judging their effects. This means that fifth estate experts have increasingly assumed the role of consumer of the popular media evidence they themselves have produced.

The merging of producer and consumer roles in symbolic fields is not an unknown phenomena. This circular, recursive logic, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown in an important study, is typical of self-enclosed expert fields, like science or the high arts, where field members alone are able to judge the worth of the products they produce. Such “restricted fields of symbolic production” (Bourdieu 1993) have always had a tendency toward “academism”: getting lost in their virtual reality, going endlessly in circles instead of truly renewing themselves, losing touch with their outer environment, excluding radical innovators. Following Bourdieu, I will argue that the experts, intellectuals, observers, and actors convening in the “fifth estate” have formed such a self-enclosed sphere, where the actors who produce media and market intelligence are at the same time in the “consumer” position of judging the worth of this intelligence. In the fifth estate, knowledge about the key instances and rules of popular resonance making is created in a circular process—which, again, is reminiscent of the “secondary markets” of finance, where investors are buyers and sellers of assets as well as producers and consumers of market information, at the very same time.

2.1. The “Balanced” Model of Control in High Modern Institutions

In high modern society, the problem of social control was articulated in two separate discursive frameworks: those of “popular resonance” and “availability.” The two tropes had equally originated in the modernist interpretive tradition, but represented the worldview of two very different institutional fields. The main aim of this section is to analyze how, in the past age of high modernity, the leading big institutions maintained a balance—although an unequal balance—between the two tropes of social control.

The long-dominant trope of “availability” represents the organizational ideology of high modern big institutions: the Fordist Factory,

the Mass Party (and Trade Union), High Journalism, and Mass Entertainment Media. These institutions functioned for decades with the assumption that “the people” are available for them, for with their institutional power they are able to connect and control the population on a mass scale. Actors of “big institutions” were confident that their institutions’ size was large enough, their symbolic authority was high enough, and their inner operational logic rational enough to effectively integrate members of modern society. The integrative power of big institutions had been attributed to their rationally organized pyramidal infrastructure that guaranteed the sustained local presence of their technological-organizational apparatus throughout the country. In high modern times, the local retailer represented the only available end point in the distribution chain of mass produced commodities; a limited number of broadcast and print media reached the mass audience; locally embedded representatives of mass parties and mass trade unions transferred the will of local electorates into the political center; news media employed a wide network of locally planted journalists providing in-depth reports on an exclusive basis. The pyramidal grid of “big institutions” connected local populations to the central realms of the state and the economy. The trope of “availability” has suggested that the people, however elusive or resistive they may be, are also integrated into the territorial grid of “big institutions” that they do not want to, or would but simply cannot, leave. According to the trope of availability, the “big institution” is able to connect and control people by its own infrastructure—and it does not need to maximize the immediate popular resonance of its symbolic or material products.

The trope of “popular resonance” has a longer history than that of availability, and, thus, in contrast to the latter, can be less linked to a single type of institution. The nineteenth century fostered collectivist understandings of the popular, which was meant to be the prime antipode of the individualized image of the enlightened bourgeois citizen (the prime actor of capitalist democracy). Popular classes were either associated with the degraded image of a faceless and potentially dangerous mass (culminating in the twentieth-century resentment over the age of the masses), or seen as a collective subject of political revolution or cultural resistance. However, in the twentieth century, with the political and economic emancipation of excluded classes, the “popular” cultural values conventionally attributed to the lower classes have grad-

ually been expanded to the more universalistic category of “the people.” Meanwhile the notion of the people has increasingly been regarded as the aggregate of sovereign individuals, the citizens and consumers of a matured capitalist democracy. The old understanding of popular tastes has been dissociated from the image of a deprived underclass and has been reconciled with the individualist, secular, plural tendencies of modern society.

The shift has been embodied in the idea that modern individuals are consumers on the marketplace and audiences of popular mass media. With the rise of high modern, high capitalist society in the twentieth century, elites have vested a high interest into the market and the media, being aware of these institutions’ quintessential role in the dismantling of premodern loyalty structures and the “constitution of modernity” (Murdock 1993). In the first truly “consumerist” decade of high modernity, the 1920s (Slater 1997, 13), the most developed countries’ elites (entrepreneurs, journalists, media owners, and politicians) were aware of the fact that “modern” people regularly buy consumer goods and follow mass mediated information and culture. By that time, all the experts of market analysis and media management had stepped onto the stage. During this decade in the United States, Madison Avenue established itself as the heart of advertising (Schudson 1984), the pioneers of media management wrote their big books establishing PR as a discipline (Ewen 1996), and the first market research company, Nielsen, was founded. These developments were followed in the 1930s by the first public opinion measurement service (Gallup) and media consumption measurement service (Nielsen Audiometer). European countries caught up with America at varied paces. By the first post-WWII decade, full-fledged infrastructures of market research and media management had been established in advanced capitalist societies.

The institutions invented and maintained the complex representation of the modern “people” that could be controlled through “popular resonance.” Accordingly, in the individualized environment of modern society, people would have many opportunities to elude control—and they would answer to those instances only when a symbolic product or personality or actor finds a way to “resonate” with their inner dispositions. The trope of “popular resonance” has suggested that “the people” are interested in forms of culture and communication that they find cognitively and emotionally accessible, relevant to their personal

lives, morally genuine, and strong and moving. Accordingly, everything that lies beyond these grammars of popular resonance would very likely end up being evaded, resisted, filtered out by the popular audience.

Although the expertise on “popular resonance” existed in a developed form since the mid-twentieth century, it did not form an “autonomous” discursive field, because its protagonists had been subordinated to the large bureaucratic organizations that controlled societies in the twentieth century. In the high modern settings of social control, popular media and popular (cultural) markets were not perceived to pose a direct threat to big institutions, which were believed to effectively reach the individual, be it in the role of the market costumer or the media audience. In the twentieth century, the growing infrastructures of market and media interpretation were subordinated to the “big institutions” of high modern society, they were supposed to assist the efficient completion of these institutions’ inner operational logic. Media and market experts put their expertise to the service of Fordist production, mass party mobilization, high journalism and broadcast media entertainment. Media and market experts assisted entrepreneurs, politicians, journalists and media managers with data about public opinion or market demand, with image management strategies and public relations campaigns. These clients did account for media and market intelligence (as historic evidence suggests, with more or less reluctance), however, their strategies were basically driven by the inner rationality of their institutions.

In high modern society, each “big institution” had developed its own specific understanding of the population it controlled, and these conceptions had all been established as a balance between the modernist tropes of resonance and availability, and the values of nomadism and of discipline these tropes embodied. In the high modern age when big institutions were still in control, the concept of availability had primacy over that of popular resonance, this latter fulfilling a supplementary role. This, however, did not mean that big institutions would have not cared about offering “resonant” symbolic or material products. The notion of availability could have a primacy because it was taken for granted, while popular resonance was seen as much more uncertain. The alleged availability of people was not derived from their attachment to “resonant” products/cultures/ideologies but the territorial presence of monopolistic big institutions which had lacked contenders with a similarly powerful pyramidal structure and territorial grid.

It is vitally important to recognize that both modernist tropes of control have represented a particular mixture of opposite modernist values (subordination vs. emancipation, activity vs. passivity, consent vs. choice). They have offered, of course, very different mixtures of opposite values, different ways to imagine the people as potentially conformist and potentially insubordinate, different models of connecting and controlling people.

The trope of availability has offered a specific mixture of modernist opposites. The idea that people are available for the “big institution” has referred equally to people’s unquestioned loyalty, their lack of choice, their dependence, but also the more positive potentials of their sustained presence, like their availability to being mobilized or educated or accustomed to new opportunities (commodities, technologies, policies, culture, information) by big institutions. The trope of availability has maintained that the people can be disciplined and civilized, for good or bad, into the particular culture and ideology represented by big institutions. A rather different set of opposite values has been put in motion by the trope of popular resonance, due to its key assumption that people are able to selectively endorse what they find “resonant” and evade what they find alien. This ability, it has been argued, would allow people to care only about what they find immediately appealing, which means to vindicate their narrowest ideological viewpoints, their most immediate gut judgments, or preference for “low” culture and easy information. At the same time, the same ability of selection and evasion has also been seen as a resource for people to resist impulses irrelevant to their lives, to escape from elite-imposed consent, to judge the authenticity of the voices that talk to them.

In the following I will present how the two modernist tropes of social control have been present in an unequally balanced form in the life of high modern big institutions.

NEWS MAKING

Highbrow news making is a good starting point to illustrate how the balance of the two basic principles of social control has structured the practices of big institutions. This requires at the first step to reconsider the conventional scholarly narrative that has opposed high journalism with “the popular” and explained the former’s contemporary crisis with

the recent shift of popular audience tastes to the heart of the commercialized media system (e.g., Hallin 1992). Arguably, this association of high journalism with rational, educative, elitist address conceals the fact that the most influential institution of highbrow news making, broadcast TV news, was in fact designed to serve the wants and needs of the popular audience. As Herbert Gans has made it clear in his seminal analysis on news making (1979, 235–80), broadcast TV news was not designed simply to mirror the objective structural challenges society faced, but to satisfy the preferences of common people. TV news was made in the first place for the average news-viewing person who, after returning to “his” private home after work, would like to discover what happened in the outer world he had been immersed in during the day, but he would not invest too much energy into this discovery, for this would require him to symbolically quit his intimate family space again. According to Gans, broadcast TV news was made for this imagined figure, an invented popular audience who would be in a constant limbo between the outer world (the alien, the complex, the broad) and the private world (familiar, simple, narrow). It needed to provide clues to enable the audience to meaningfully connect the two worlds. Journalists and editors deliberately designed TV news in a way that resonates with both worlds at the same time, and were convinced that this inclusivity granted the most universal value to their programs.

The universalistic address designed for the “popular” audience was explicitly contrasted in high journalistic news making with two forms of address that were debunked as more particularistic: the elite analysis made for intellectuals and the tabloid address designed for sensation seekers. News makers could refuse to offer immediately appealing sensations to the audience because they were confident that they had a deeper, more considered vision about the place, the needs, and even the preferences of the popular audience than audience members themselves (who might follow their immediate instincts and not their own best interests if they were provided with the opportunity to choose between broadcast news and other, more sensational or personalized programs). Journalists, then, conventionally antagonized over allowing their news programs to be rated according to immediate audience reactions, however, as Gans’s argument suggests, this resistance against ratings was less motivated by a narrow-minded elitism than by their attachment to what they saw as the most universalistic and valid conception of the popular.

The “high modern” conceptualization of the popular has maintained a multifold balance between antagonistic approaches. In the framework of broadcast television, journalists could integrate the key values of popular resonance without submitting themselves to the tyranny of the immediately and irresistibly resonant. They provided popular appeal and structural information, addressing the consumer and the citizen at the same time. The journalistic vision of the popular has allowed news makers to account for people’s resentment against overburdening and hardly accessible analysis, without fully regressing into the private. These balances were rooted in a more fundamental balance between resonance and availability. Since people followed broadcast news programs en masse from evening to evening, the figure of the popular audience could credibly be constructed as “available” for the institutions of news making. Availability was considered a fact that legitimates the journalistic vision of the common people, while the question of popular resonance—what would happen if the popular audience was given a choice to select “more resonant” news programs—was seen as possibly relevant but altogether speculative. The challenge of popular resonance, so it seemed, could be addressed and resolved inside the existing framework of news making for the “available” mass audience.

MASS PARTIES

Mass parties in high modern representative democracy established a very similar balance between popular resonance and availability. In high modern society, political parties were seen at the same time as effective institutions of class representation and as sources of a wider popular appeal flowing beyond the confines of the class. As agents of class representation, parties were believed to efficiently integrate large crowds of people with similar social status and to profit from their voters’ sustained availability when it came to elections or demonstrations or policy formation. High modern mass parties were widely seen as institutions of the civil society which maintain effective mediating mechanisms (party hierarchy with elected officers at various levels, local party offices everywhere, conventions, demonstrations, related civil society associations or trade unions) channeling the will of a social class into the state. Meanwhile, the mass party was understood as an elite-driven

party that uses modern techniques of advertising, consumer research, and media management in its efforts to reach out to less committed, popular media-consuming constituencies. Accordingly, although the established institutional framework of the party was built on the supposed “availability” of a solid class base, it was also seen as capable of answering the challenge of “resonating” with more volatile popular audiences. Thus, the (in)famous figure of today’s media party that would flexibly detect and articulate popular audience “demand” in media-friendly ways is not a late modern invention but a highly resilient modernist understanding of how modern politics works. In illustration, it might be worth evoking three instances that played a important role in the (self)understanding and organization of high modern mass parties: first, the idea that the party’s media image is a key factor in its electoral success, second, the understanding of parties as elitist symbol providers, and third, the “people’s party” as an established model in high modern society.

For many decades after the war, the mass parties of Western democracies worked in a media environment dominated by broadcast popular television. Historical accounts on the marketing and commercial promotion of mass parties in the twentieth century have convincingly documented that parties did react to this environment, and the resulting “soaping” of politics—the presentation of political actors as desirable and enjoyable media-friendly images—has been an effective practice for decades. In fact, the need to “make image laden themes a part of . . . campaign work” was already articulated in the very dawn of mass politics after World War I (Wring 1995, 110).³ However, it is only later, after the arrival of broadcast television, that political image became a key organizing idea of campaigning. As historic analysis makes clear, professional PR and advertising agencies have been

³ The advertising metaphor of politics was in use already in the midwar period. As Dominic Wring reports (1995), by the 1920s leading Labour figures like Philip Snowden argued that “It is so very easy to bore an audience with facts and figures and statistics. The person who uses facts in speaking or writing should remember that the way to impress is to give a mental picture.” Another leading party activist and political scientist of the era, Graham Wallas (who invented the notion of “party image”) noted that “advertisement and party politics are becoming more and more assimilated in method.”

involved into electoral campaigns: personalized TV ads of politicians played an important role, for example, Willy Brandt's first campaign for chancellor in 1961, but also in many other televised campaigns in the era (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid 1995, 87–88).

Concerns that televised political advertising may divert the political process itself have been raised from the beginning. Typical are the warnings of media critic Neil Postman who noted that parties' use of TV advertising hampers them in developing well-crystallized policies and visions voters could engage with. This is due to the fact, Postman argues, that television consistently fails to "reveal who the best man [i.e., the best political candidate] is. . . . The reason, almost entirely, has to do with 'image.' . . . For on television the politician does not so much offer the audience an image of himself, as offer himself as an image of the audience. And therein lies one of the most powerful influences of the television commercial on political discourse" (Postman 1986, 134). In the age of broadcast media, political actors clearly felt the "popular resonance" of advertising, and critics in academia as well as in politics warned that televisual image making undermines the articulation of class interests and values through the democratic channels of mass party membership.⁴

The second point to be addressed is that mass parties, despite their large pyramidal structures of class integration and intermediation, have very often been envisioned merely as policy or symbol suppliers who would offer their slogans and images to the floating spectators or consumers of politics. It is more than a strange coincidence that by the end of the 1950s, when Western European democracies had recovered from the cataclysm of the war and crystallized their political systems based on class-representing mass parties, academic research has established a strictly elitist model, where parties were symbol providers detached from their spectator-consumer constituencies as its standard model of democracy. Key political theorists in Europe and the United States—Schumpeter, Downs, Dahl, Kirchheimer, and, later, Bourdieu—commonly described political parties as elite providers offering symbolic products to the underinformed and unintegrated voters of mass medi-

⁴ For a discussion of political controversies around the issue in Britain, see Wring 1995.

ated democracy. This understanding, clearly, had not much to do with the self-image of mass parties as large civil institutions of sustained and interactive political intermediation. The abyss between mass parties' self-understanding as mouthpieces or mobilizers and their expert image as elite providers of mediated symbols also reveals the ambiguously dual character of the representative mass party in high modernity.

The duality manifests itself the most clearly in the figure of the people's party. People's parties played a key role in the high modern political landscape. In Europe, their birth has been linked to the 1959 Godesberg Program of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, where the SPD famously renounced its traditional worker's party position and declared itself to be instead "a party of the whole people" (Smith 1990, 158). This shift clearly showed that as European countries developed their American-style affluent consumer societies, they equally adopted the American model of party competition in which two quasi-identical people's parties fight for power. The rise of people's parties was most famously theorized by Otto Kirchheimer (1966), who envisioned a historic shift in Western democracies from "mass integration parties" representing particular class interests to "catch-all parties" representing popular interests in general. In light of the six decades that passed since the Godesberg Program, it seems clear that the two party models have structured the high modern mass party. The historic transition that Kirchheimer depicted as a fait accompli in the 1950s turned out to process at a much slower pace. For example, critics of the British Labour Party complained even in the mid-1990s about how Labour consistently failed to be a catch-all party (Kavanagh 1997, 533–34). Certainly, the two antagonistic concepts of democratic politics as class representation (integrating a social class into a political institution) and popular media-based symbolic service (symbolically gratifying the demands of various voter groups) persisted together for decades in the practice of mainstream mass parties in high modern society. It is exactly in this balance that Graham Smith finds "the secret of the success of the people's party" model, which according to him lays in its "twofold strength: the 'passive' support of traditional social groups combined with the techniques of the catch-all party—the modern methods of campaigning and the access to the technology of mass communication" (Smith 1990, 160). The duality clearly represents a balance between the "availability" ("passive support" in Smith's somewhat misleading

terminology) of a politically integrated mass-scale constituency and the “resonance” between party as a provider of mediated symbolic products and its broad and diverse political audience.

COMMODITY PRODUCTION AND ADVERTISING

The balance of popular resonance and availability has been equally present in the established practice of product advertising. The dominant channel of product advertising has traditionally been television—and as far as “popular resonance” is concerned, not much argumentation is needed for linking this modernist trope to the TV commercial. TV commercials are commonsensically appealing, and equally apparent—even for the audience—is the key function of their popular appeal to tie people to buyable commodities. For many observers, TV commercials forge resonant “connections” which are basically emotional and visual, and which set a dreamlike unity between the customer, fellow consumers of the product, and the image of the ideal customer rhetorically constructed in the ad. Seen from this point of view, TV commercials offered symbolic points for personal identification. This “resonance” has been attributed with a key role maintaining customers’ desire for the mass produced commodities that “high” capitalist industry offered. The same emotional-personal “resonance,” many have argued, has taken an even greater role in the post-Fordist “economy of signs,” where production technology is developed enough to create a great variation of small details that may not affect much of products’ functionality, but can be symbolically amplified, producing an infinite amount of cultural distinctions allowing consumers to meaningfully distinguish products that are practically identical in terms of their use value. Meanwhile, other observers have been less keen to admit the prominence of image making and argued that commercials, even on TV, have kept providing rational information about product quality, technology, newness, availability, and price. There is no need to do justice between these approaches, for, as Andrew Wernick has convincingly argued, rational or emotional address are equally suitable means to forge a connection with the audience, and this connection is what counts in the first place: “[A]dvertising’s first-order function as promotion,” Wernick claims, “leads it to engage with the values, norms, goals and dreams of those to whom it

is addressed” (1991, 26). Indeed, it is in this close engagement with consumers’ hearts and their minds where we can find the very essence of TV commercials’ popular appeal and “resonance” with viewers’ dispositions.

The well-known concept of TV advertising as “resonance making,” however plausible, describes only a half of the story, for it conceals the key role that the trope of “availability” played in the established promotional practice of corporations. In high modern society, corporate leaders did not view mass TV as a key advertising channel, for they tended to believe their popular consumership was basically available and approachable by the distribution and sales force of the company itself. This corporate conviction clearly downgraded in managers’ eyes the importance of TV ads’ potential to “connect” consumers with their high popular “resonance.” Being reluctant to build on the engaging power of advertisements, corporate managers believed that their products would speak for themselves and reach the audience on their own. This sense of self-confidence explains corporate elites’ belief in an “available” consumership. In this matrix, media advertising was a supplement to corporate distributional infrastructure.

Corporate belief in the availability of consumers maintained a somewhat relaxed atmosphere in which corporate advertising resembled a ritualized spending habit more than part of a well-designed strategy to capture popular attention, interest, or loyalty. Michael Schudson has offered evocative evidence about the corporate mindset toward TV advertising in the age when popular consumership was considered “available.” Accordingly, the selling strategy of the corporations did not revolve around the ad campaign that would make the product desirable with its “resonant” or persuasive power—on the contrary, a company’s established infrastructures were believed to provide managers with genuine information about which product is sellable and should thus be advertised.

One of these infrastructures was the distribution chain that provided informational feedback about which products sold well on the market. According to econometric research of historic data, Schudson argues, the main advertising strategy of companies was to increase the ad budget of those products the sales numbers of which had already been on the rise. (Meanwhile, strangely enough, rises in the ad budget were not followed by any increase in the sales of the adver-

tised product—confirming corporate managers’ lack of trust in advertising and their strategy of promoting those products that are popular already.) All this, Schudson argues, reverses the commonsensical equation: it is not that “advertising causes sales” but on the contrary, “sales cause advertising” (Schudson 1984, 18). This means that managers tended to see TV ads as a form of symbolic “backup” that may be reasonable to use for safety’s sake—but certainly not the royal way to win people’s hearts. The second infrastructure corporations used to judge the salability of a product was production itself, since it is engineers and other expert employees who were the best informed about the quality of the products, which managers saw as the very key to market success. Corporations, Schudson has argued, referring to a study on prescription drug advertising, “tend to put advertising dollars behind products whose high quality . . . is likely to be a stimulus to sales itself” (ibid.). Finally, the third infrastructure companies judged essential were selling agents. Referring to an interesting remark of a Coca Cola manager, Schudson notes that companies may use the “resonant” aura of TV ads to energize their sales force rather than to enchant the consumer directly.

These three points illustrate a corporate mindset in which consumers are seen to be “available,” connectable by the existing production and distribution infrastructures of the company, and advertising (with its popular “resonance”) is considered as a safety belt or a backup in the ongoing business of the corporation.

MASS ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION

Like the three presented fields, mass entertainment television established a balance between the two modernist principles of control. TV managers and program producers shared with actors of other big institutions the conviction that in the first place they need to exploit the loyalty of a mass audience that is available to them. This prime incentive, just like in the case of other institutions, has moderated TV actors’ eventual urge to put too much faith into popular resonance making, or to overstretch the resonant address of their TV channel.

Predominantly, the “availability” of the mass audience was imagined in a somewhat different way in television than in other institutions: it was less conceived of as a balance of opposite potentials (loyalty and

openness to mobilization or learning, etc.) but as mere passivity. The image of TV audiences as passive and loyal was “widely accepted within both the academic and business communities” (Adams 1997, 839). People in the critical corners of academia just like in the upper management of TV companies commonly maintained that TV viewers watch routinely “by the clock” (Gerbner and Gross 1976) rather than picking programs they find “resonant.” According to this view, viewers’ “availability is based more on spare time than on the availability of the preferred content” (Owen and Wildman 1992, 10), and, thus, it had been seen as fully reasonable to expect that “a large portion of viewers will stay [on] whatever channel they started the evening with, and that these viewers could be counted on by network programmers” (Goodhardt et al. 1986; quoted in Eastman et al. 1995). Given the sustained channel loyalty of the mass audience in the broadcast TV era, the prime cultural product of broadcast television was the program flow that audiences watched evening by evening (Miège 1987).⁵

⁵ American broadcast TV networks, which may well be grasped as the archetype of mass entertainment television, had plenty of evidence documenting audience passivity. Networks systematically measured audience “inertia” and found that the majority of any program’s audience comes from the previous program’s viewership, people simply “flowing through” from program to program. (This type of audience behavior was managed in the practice of program “scheduling,” that was aimed at rowing programs in a way that the mass audience would never leave the right track throughout the evening.) Networks equally monitored whether viewers remembered commercials the day after their airing, and these “day after recall scores” were judged consolingly high. The belief in audience loyalty was so solid that broadcast networks did not even bother to prove (with costly research) that people actually watched their commercials: the audience reach of a commercial was defined as the number of TV sets tuned in to the channel at the moment the ad was on air, with no further proof of viewers actually watching it. Broadcast networks’ business model was based on “opportunity to see,” and the assumption that a “static” audience does indeed use this opportunity. The key condition of this model to work is that nothing breaks the routine flow of TV programming—hence the proverbial hostility of networks toward all innovations (remote control, VCR, cable, Internet) that passed more power into the hands of the audience. We should not forget that the entertainment programs of public service television were also expected to produce high ratings. In the UK, for example, the public authorities considered audience ratings in their decisions relating to the licensing and financing of the BBC (Ellis 2000).

In American broadcast television, the principle of availability-based bureaucratic control had been translated to a programming practice called Least Objectionable Programming that revolved around the idea of not scaring off the audience from the habitual flow of easy-going, familiar programs. The background idea had been that audiences do not make meaningful distinctions between particular programs, except for the case of viewer revolt against something “objectionable” that deviates from the routine and pulls the viewer out of her relaxing comfort zone. Control over viewers had been seen to depend on the elimination of such failures that break the seamless TV flow. Overly “resonant”—attractive, engaging, thrilling, moving, enigmatic—programs had been seen as potentially “objectionable” for viewers who do not want more than a relaxed evening. Evocative to this programming strategy are the words of a CBS manager who has explained how all their most thrilling and hip and creative programs had failed due to the resistance of their culturally conservative rural audiences (Gitlin 1983).

At the same time, channel executives and prime time program producers had been well aware that for their TV programs to “flow,” they need outstanding TV personalities who are able to anchor the channel into the family life of audiences, who would relate to them as virtual family friends. Mediocre as it may be, the broadcast TV flow cannot keep going with mediocre personalities. The TV personality was the trademark of the broadcast TV channel: as commentator or talk show host, he (mostly he) was neither one among the celebrities he gave the floor to, nor was he the everyman figure that are the reality TV heroes of the present age. The TV personality might best be grasped as the main representative of the institution of television itself as a common cultural forum (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983) that allows all the polarities of society—high and low, celebrity and everyman, politics and entertainment—to mix and mingle. The TV personality has a “resonant,” enchanting symbolic power over both the audience and the elite guest—and with this power he can balance out those contradictory values he assists to present themselves on the public forum of which he is the main priest and orchestrator.

The TV personality is (one of) the subordinate “resonance maker[s]” of the broadcast TV institution that basically operates along the principle of availability-based control. Although the resonant

powers of the TV host can play out in a strictly limited space, even this bounded presence can be enough to establish the delicate balances that are typical of the operation of high modern “big institutions” analyzed in this chapter.

To illustrate how such balances are established in the practice of television, a highly evocative example is a description that Hollywood filmmaker Billy Wilder gave about the legendary TV host Johnny Carson. Carson’s work, as Wilder has so rightly interpreted, builds bridges between rehearsed routine and spontaneous humor, banality, and extravagance, workerly and intellectual audiences, low culture and high culture, the millions and the elites.

“By the simple law of survival, Carson is the best,” he said. “He enchants the invalids and the insomniacs as well as the people who have to get up at dawn. He is the Valium and the Nembutal of a nation. No matter what kind of dead-asses are on the show, he has to make them funny and exciting. He has to be their nurse and their surgeon. He has no conceit. He does his work and he comes prepared. If he’s talking to an author, he has read the book. Even his rehearsed routines sound improvised. He’s the cream of middle-class elegance, yet he’s not a mannequin. He has captivated the American bourgeoisie without ever offending the highbrows, and he has never said anything that wasn’t liberal or progressive. Every night, in front of millions of people, he has to do the *salto mortale*”—circus parlance for an aerial somersault performed on the tightrope. “What’s more”—and here Wilder leaned forward, tapping my knee for emphasis—“he does it without a net. No rewrites. No retakes. The jokes must work tonight.” (Tynan 1978)

Broadcast mass television, even in America, was not simply a dumb wasteland (although, among the four “big institutions” analyzed above, it certainly fell the closest to this dystopian picture), but a “balance-making” infrastructure that aimed at maintaining the long-term loyalties of its “available” audience by serving all its contradictory needs (for routine and spontaneity, for high culture and low culture, for common-sense conservatism and for progress, for admiration and for farce), at the same time, in a delicate balance.

2.2. Breaking the Balance: New Speculative Centers “above” Big Institutions

The dominant institutions of high modern society, I have argued so far, maintained an unequal balance between “availability”-based infrastructures of control (as gravity point) and those based on “popular resonance” (as a necessary supplement). The balancing of two different modernist principles of control, as I have shown, has accounted for the prevalent strategies of high modern big institutions: the half-serious/half-popularized address of broadcast TV news, the two-faced strategy of mass parties of acting as class parties and people’s parties at the same time, production companies’ half-hearted reliance on TV advertising as a supplement to their distribution infrastructures, and the strategy of mass entertainment TV to offer a least common denominator program flow with outstanding TV personalities who embody the balance between television’s larger-than-life and mundane character.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the trope of availability has lost its credibility as an effective principle of popular control. This is due to the fact that high modern big institutions have lost their integrative powers: an increasing number of people escaped their territorial grid and refused, self-consciously or instinctively, to be “available” to them. Party and union membership started to decline, news programs were losing viewers, product ads lost the attention of viewers, the Fordist industrial production company faced increasing difficulties in meeting consumer demand, the audience of broadcast TV shrank. A new social and cultural age started to take shape, one in which people decreasingly felt that they belonged to any of these institutions. Loyalty to big institutions seemed increasingly old-fashioned and inferior to newly emerging—allegedly more direct, engaging, effective, “popular”—forms of connection between people and politicians, journalists, media, and economic actors. The age of popular “availability”—of people being connectable and controllable by high modern pyramidal infrastructures—seemed to have passed for good.

With the changes in the 1960s and 1970s, “connecting” people has become an increasing problem. In the fields of politics, industry, news making, and mass entertainment, it has been commonly felt that people

act as affluent market customers and popular media audiences, and by taking up these two increasingly intermingling roles, they can effectively vindicate their tastes and preferences in the emerging, multichoice environment. The crisis of the big institution, its felt inability to reach out to the popular customer and the popular audience, was certainly a prime mover of the systemic transition to late modernity and capitalism. Politicians, firm managers, journalists, and media owners saw disquieting questions popping up about the whereabouts of the popular audience-customer, and they started to look beyond the infrastructure of big institutions for new answers.

The crisis of high modern social control triggered an immense wave of reflection on the newly emerging order of social control. In the last decades, it has been commonly felt that the locus of social control is shifting from the high modern big institution to the late modern system of popular media. According to the common understanding, on the ruins of big institutions, new players would emerge that can track and gratify “the will of the people” more effectively by reaching people as users of commercialized popular media services rather than as local clients of big institutions. Along these lines, the institutions of politics, television, journalism, and economy have no longer been envisioned as pyramidal infrastructures of mass integration, but as symbol and service providers who primarily use the channels of commercialized popular media to connect and control their floating consumer-audiences. The changes have been commonly thought to mark the rise of a new, popular media-based regime of social control.

Scholarly research of late modern society has plastically reconstructed how the “popular” institutions of marketized media have been placed into the forefront at the expense of the big institution. This shift of control has been argued to manifest itself in all the key institutions of social control: mass party memberships and infrastructures contracted and new forms of “media parties” arose, the authority of high journalism started to dissolve and new genres of popular TV journalism emerged, mass media disintegrated into a much more heterogeneous and uncontrollable popular media ecology, Fordist commodity production (of functional household technologies) capitulated to the post-Fordist production (of symbolic products, information and communication services, heavily culturalized and branded commodities). The shift of power from high modern big institutions toward new,

mediatized and commercialized forms of “popular control” has been apparent in the last decades.

The transformations upset the former balance between availability and popular resonance: the former has been disqualified from the game, while the latter has increasingly been praised as the dominant principle of control that has proved to stand the test of time and dominates the emerging, “popular” age of late modernity. With the upsetting of the balance, availability has been redefined as the mere derivative of popular resonance. Only what “resonates,” the newly emerging common sense has suggested, can make popular audiences—consumers “available,” connectable, controllable. Late modern people have been constructed as basically unavailable audience—consumers: unmanageable, uncontrollable, elusive, reacting only to the immediately and outstandingly resonant. On the whole, connecting/controling the people is no longer seen to emerge from a balance between availability and resonance: it has become equivalent with popular resonance only.

In this section I will shortly present how the discursive “sanctification” of resonance-based popular control has emerged from newly emerging coalitions between institutional actors who found high modern forms of availability-based control inefficient.

Since the 1970s, the high modern infrastructures of availability-based control have increasingly seemed to disconnect people’s transforming loyalties and identities. The first actors to speculate about this possible mismatch were the top elites of big institutions, who became concerned that their established institutional channels of control could not catch up with today’s culturally differentiated, individualized, and highly mobile society that lives in a culturally and commercially pluralized environment. In all the four big institutions analyzed above, top executives decided to bypass the established infrastructures of their institution and to connect and control popular audience—consumers with the help of external experts of popular media-based “resonance making.” From the coalition of top executives and media and market experts, new “speculative centers” emerged on top of the high modern institution.

These emerging “speculative centers” took over the whole institution, sidelined the protagonists of availability-based control, and restructured the institution according to what the new elites saw as

the “new rules” of resonance-based popular control. This elite-driven “coup” against the big institution sidelined the whole body of its mid-level actors (journalists, local party officers, TV channel leaders and program producers, and engineers and industrial designers) who conventionally had been the prime agents (practitioners, ideologues, beneficiaries) of the former model of availability-based social control.

COMMODITY PRODUCTION AND ADVERTISING

Studies in branding and post-Fordism have convincingly documented how the worries about a cultural mismatch between company and customer urged elite managers of commodity-producing industries to restructure their firms. These restructurings originated in managerial concerns that the craft of industrial engineers and designers to create functional, durable, and affordable products will not satisfy in itself their costumers, who would strive, following popular media-channeled hints, for more distinctive symbolic meanings that they could project into the product and also into themselves as its owners. The stronger the worries have become, the more the classical infrastructures of Fordist commodity production and distribution have been subordinated to the new “speculative centers” responsible for branding, media management, and market research. Thus, while in the Fordist enterprise, “the production of goods was governed by the engineers and designers rather than by cultural intermediaries, who—in the form of advertising agencies—had an entirely separate and subordinate role, instructed to give a cultural coating to objects whose shape was already determined by producers” (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, 178), the post-Fordist enterprise has put an end to the separation of marketing and branding from production, and established the former as superior to the latter. In the end of the process, production has been subordinated to the company’s elite “brain” that has been entitled to design how the company’s products would incite intense popular resonance. The “speculative center,” composed of elite managers, image makers, media experts and marketers, has increasingly been credited with producing real added value (resonant symbolic meanings connected to commodities), while more and more parts of production have been downgraded as no value-added work and have been outsourced to global peripheries or supplier networks (Klein 2010).

Most of those employed in the Fortune 500 top companies in the USA now work in lines of activity that have nothing to do with the primary line of business with which their company is identified. . . . Benetton, for example, engages in no production directly, but simply operates as a powerful marketing machine, which transmits commands to a wide array of independent producers. (Harvey 1990, 158–59)

POLITICS

It is in a highly similar vein that elite political actors questioned the integrating and intermediating capacities of their parties and built their own speculative centers of “resonance making.” Since the 1980s and 1990s, political leaders have increasingly felt that the scale of their parties’ core constituencies—easily mobilizable voters whose political loyalty is rooted in their sense of belonging to local social networks formally or informally connected to the mass party—is shrinking. Party elites in the last decades have felt that the mass party as an institution has emptied, since voters kept more distance than the party would have expected, and distilled their political judgments from the impulses and information made available by popular media. Seen from this point of view, the conventional mass party seemed to hinder and not enable effective political mobilization.

The distrust in the mass party as an adequate intermediating infrastructure goes back to the 1960s. Fifty years ago, in America, some elite political actors suspected that society was more differentiated than what the political party could handle. According to Robert V. Friedenberg, the first time this recognition broke through was in the important moment when, during the nomination period of the presidential elections, the staff of John F. Kennedy decided to go for the Democratic nomination by gathering popular support with a personalized campaign that bypassed the party infrastructure. Friedenberg cites Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s key advisor, who summed up the conclusion of a key staff meeting in 1960 in the following way: “[Y]ou had to examine the nominating process, which is not a free open popular vote, but a process which is dominated and influenced by all the groups in the Democratic coalition—the farmers, labor, the South, the big city people, et cetera. These groups are more influential in a

convention than they are in the country as a whole.” These objections of the staff of a future Democratic leader against their own party reveal, Friedenberg concludes, that “from the top down, from the lips of candidate Kennedy, campaigners recognized that they would, in effect, be running as outsiders against the party. They would take their case to the people, in the primaries, and, if successful, force the party to nominate the Massachusetts senator” (1997, 21). Kennedy’s nomination campaign represents certainly the first major crack in the mass party-based political system in which a party’s program and ideology and image were formed by the midrange officers of the party hierarchy, the “local party bosses” who “run the show,” as Bruce Newman (1994) has put it, since they could credibly claim to represent the will of their local people (“farmers, labor, the South, the big city” in the case of Democrats). By the 1980s, these midrange party officers found themselves sidelined by the speculative party brain (leading candidates and their staff composed of media experts, marketers, and consultants), which accumulated all the power to detect popular will and to distill it into party image and program.

The same story can be told about how the conventional intermediating infrastructure of trade unions has been bypassed by company management and their paid PR experts. In the 1980s, company executives pushed aside trade unions and hired external communication experts in the hope of establishing more direct, more efficient (less resistant, less “hostile”) communication channels with employees. In this era, “a number of employers began to rethink their whole approach to internal and external communications. The crucial innovation was the adoption of systems of communication directly to their employees rather than using the good offices of the unions” (Jones 1986, 12; quoted in Miller and Dinan 2000, 12).

NEWS MAKING

Recent institutional changes in news making show a highly similar pattern. It is a well-documented fact that since the 1980s, as the number of competing media outlets has multiplied due to technological change and market deregulation, information-producing institutions could count less and less on the availability of their audience. If the implicit journalistic hint suggesting that “were the audience given a

choice, a significant proportion would opt out for more personally relevant news" (Gans 1979, 235) was an informed suspicion in the 1960s and 1970s, it became an immediate threat by the 1980s. Consequently, the former journalistic image of the "popular" audience, drawn as a combination of different social roles and needs (consumer and citizen, private and public, etc.), has lost to a new concept in which popular needs are equated with the immediate choice of the most "resonant" alternative.

This new understanding has been represented by the top managers of news organizations who started to question journalists' ability to "connect" with the popular audience and decided to closely monitor people's information needs and whether they are indeed gratified by the journalist. Journalists' loss of control over defining their own audiences reveals well their shrinking professional "autonomy within news organizations" (Hallin 1992). The shift of power, according to the standard view represented by Daniel Hallin, signals that news making is "increasingly dominated by the logic of the market" (*ibid.*). However, seen from the viewpoint offered in this book, the loss of journalistic autonomy signals first of all the rise of a highly centralized "speculative brain" in news-making organizations that has the power to melt the walls between business and editorial departments in the name of its own, superior concept about what the "popular audience" needs and wants.

As journalists have lost their gatekeeping powers to filter and process information according to their own inner principles, professional communicators themselves have turned to them with a new mindset: they have started simply to "use" journalists, instead of trying to persuade them or winning their sympathies. The words of BBC journalist John Tusa illustrate well this power shift: "In the past press officers have wanted to channel and control to journalists' understanding of the story. Today, they see us as another outlet, more volatile but not dissimilar to an advertising slot. . . . It is as if the appearance belongs to the interviewee" (Tusa 1989). It is clear that the PR staffs undermining the journalist "from the outside" and the elite managers (and their media and market experts) threatening journalistic autonomy "from the inside" of news organizations have all acted in the belief that maximally resonant, popular messages are the key factors in connecting and controlling people—and in this sense, they have formed a coalition

against the journalistic institutions of news making, and their balanced view on the “available” popular audience.

MASS ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION

Similar institutional changes have transformed mass entertainment television in the last decades. In the high modern era of broadcasting, the dominant media institution was the broadcast TV channel, since audiences were loyal to the channel itself rather than to its top individual programs. However, with the rise of today’s hypercompetitive, plural media environment, channels could less and less count on their audience to remain “available” for them. Due to these efforts, TV channel-owning media companies have gradually transformed into multimedia corporations that, by owning hundreds of media platforms, are able to distribute their branded programs in many places and often can even force their competitors to distribute the same programs. In this transformed media landscape, the key players are no longer the TV channels, big pyramidal institutions exploiting the loyalty of mass audiences, but the headquarters of media corporations, which work as the main nodes in the highly complex networks of media production and distribution.

Being the key nodes of today’s televisual “production culture” (Caldwell 2008), the “speculative centers” of media corporations are responsible for the creation of multiplatform TV programs. This extremely complex task involves expert reflection on every point of the production and distribution chain. Commercial TV program making today is not only a highly aware creative process, aesthetically and visually, but it also involves from the beginning a strategy of program branding, reflection on product-advertising opportunities, consumer research insights, and multichannel distribution strategies.

The key cultural product of this complex media ecology is the highly “resonant,” multiplatform blockbuster TV show that, with its popularity, is expected to maximize audience attention in order to amplify opportunities of advertising and merchandizing at every possible platform. As John Caldwell’s decades of research documents, American media executives clearly felt that their institutions’ key cultural product was no longer their moderately resonant program flow, but the highly resonant, event-status contents (Caldwell 1996) that triggered commercially exploitable passions and identities (see more

in Chapter 7). Today, it is the most “resonant” programs that are regarded as the main capitalizable assets of media companies, the main tools to connect and to control the nomadic audiences rambling across the ever complexifying media landscape.

The rise of highly centralized speculative “brains of resonance making” in television industry, and the sinking of the mainstream TV channel with its one-time ability to integrate the mass audience, represents a highly similar institutional transformation to the ones reshaping the other big institutions of high modernity. Following the common pattern, the emergence of elite nodes in the media industry has substantively weakened the key actors of the broadcast TV model: the channel executives responsible for the scheduling of the program flow (Gitlin 1983; Ellis 2000) and the producers of the key prime time programs (Newcomb and Alley 1983). A new ethos of unlimited intensification has given way to the earlier, more balanced practice of integrating resonance making into a harmless, moderate program flow.

In the four high modern big institutions, the institutional shift from an availability-based to a resonance-based model of popular control has been triggered by an elite-driven coup that has been aimed at bypassing, with the help of outside media and market experts, the institutions’ established integrating and intermediating infrastructures. The newly forming coalition between high executive elites and media and market experts has pushed aside the key actors of big institutions: the journalist in news-making organizations, the engineer and designer in the Fordist factory, the local officer in the mass party and trade union, the channel executive in broadcast television. In the high modern age, these key institutional actors claimed to “control” the mass population and represented the institution’s official ideology legitimating the institution’s power.⁶ They had been powerful enough to accommodate

⁶ The actors, being placed on the middle range of institutional hierarchy, had been exempt from worries about whether the overall design of their institution is apt to maintaining the tacit support of its available audience. Instead, midlevel employees had primarily been expected to work out a specific professional ethics to justify how the institution serves the interest of the people it controls, and to display this ethics in their everyday work. Accordingly, the journalist has depicted its institution as a source of vital information, the party and trade union officer depicted his as a channel of will formation, the engineer as a provider of affordable, useful, high-quality goods, the TV

the knowledge of market and media experts to their institutions' logic. However, as the latter were adopted by top executives into the powerful "speculative centers," placed above and often against the institutions, their influence quickly outpaced the power of middle-range institutional actors. The power shift has been a key institutional background for the bubblelike expansion and amplification of media and market experts' old-new modernist discourse on popular resonance.

2.3. The Opening of a Sphere of Collective Speculation on Popular Resonance

The elite-driven coup against the high modern big institution has greatly contributed to the emergence of the fifth estate and its "neo-popular" discourse on media "resonance"-based control. As elite media and market experts have been lifted into the new "speculative centers," they have been released from their former dependence on big institutions. They opened new discourses on popular media and popular resonance, which have pulled into a common discursive sphere all those observers—academic, journalistic, intellectual, civilian—who had a say about "the popular." As the actors convening in this sphere have gradually established their own interpretive rules, the production of knowledge on popular media (culture, markets, politics) has achieved autonomy from big institutions, and the fifth estate has secured for itself a symbolic power comparable to that of these institutions themselves.

In addressing this process, the first point to be noted is that the rise of "speculative centers" has been a tense process. Elite leaders who had bypassed their institutions in the hope of connecting/controlling people more effectively were expecting immediate success from media and market experts, who, by contrast, were lacking the means of securing it, given the inevitable uncertainty of resonance-based control. Thus, the structural shift toward new "speculative centers" has immediately brought to the surface a set of unanswered questions. What are

editor as a provider of relaxed private recreation. Each actor has suggested that people have reasonable motives to be "available," to be integrated into the grid of the big institution. Thus, arguably, it is in the middle range of big institutions' hierarchy that we find the main representatives of the high modern regime of availability-based popular control.

the rules of popular resonance making and how can these rules secure popular control? How can people be given the resonant symbolic products—commodities, policies, ideologies, news, programs—they look for? How is it possible to find out which forms of popular resonance are the most exploitable for commercial and political purposes? How can the immediate appeal of resonance be turned into sustained loyalty? Answers to these questions had not been elaborated when the elite makers of the coup were taking over. Critical as they might have been to high modern institutions, actors of the new “speculative centers” were lacking well-crystallized techniques of resonance making that could have served as a sound, proven alternative to “availability-based” social control. Although elite leaders had market research and media management and branding tools at their disposal, these techniques could not secure the kind of stable, anchored, predictable framework for social control that high modern institutions had once provided.

Elite media and market experts, in a word, were lacking the directions to the new popular age they have been the architects of. In the past era of high modernity, experts of “resonance making” did not need such directions since their role was confined to producing applied intelligence on media and markets that could be used to enhance the pregiven operational logic of preexisting big institutions. By contrast, experts who had been lifted into the new “speculative centers” were expected to advise elite leaders about how to tailor their institutions so that they comply with the imperatives of popular resonance making. What the “coup-making” elite leaders—often themselves highly trained academically⁷—expected from market and media experts was not mere hints but apparent and solid evidence proving

⁷ The makers of the elite-driven coup were themselves often highly trained in economics, politics, or the social sciences. Herbert Gans convincingly presents how in news organizations a new generation of top executives started to challenge the journalistic vision of the popular audience and urged journalists to shape the news to suit the scientifically unraveled dispositions of their audience (Gans 1979, 235, 280). John Caldwell reports about a similar generational shift in the TV industry where the old, patriarchal, and parochial TV aristocracy was gradually outpaced by an aesthetically and economically more knowledgeable, critical, and self-reflexive leading elite (Caldwell 2008). It is along the same terms that post-Fordist company leaders and postmodern advertisers have been distinguished from their Fordist and high modern predecessors.

that the new model of control based on popular media and cultural “resonance” does really work.

Facing these highly threatening expectations, experts have reacted by collecting all available evidence about popular resonance making. Stepping out of the interpretive framework of their client institutions, media and market experts have increasingly exchanged evidence with each other. In the center of this intensifying information traffic stood the imaginary figure of the popular audience-consumer that media and market experts claimed to know better than big institutions. The figure of the popular audience-consumer raised much more general and complicated questions than the ones that once had been raised by the specific communication orders of particular institutions. Elite experts had no other choice but to open their ears to academic, journalistic, and intellectual discourses on popular resonance, to start new debates, to look for new models, and also to allow their own industrial data to be analyzed by academic and journalistic critics. An intense process of discursive convergence started, in which experts working at various fields exchanged their concepts and data about popular commodities and consumers, popular media and audiences.

Knowledge on popular resonance could not have concentrated so intensely in a common discursive sphere without the heavy involvement of academic research in the invention of the “popular” age. With its authority and innovativeness, with its broad pool of concepts, theories, and research techniques, the academic field has enabled and fertilized the creation of new infrastructures exploiting popular resonance. Thus, academia was more an active designer of the “new age” rather than being its independent observer. Since the 1980s, scholarly interest in the new “popular media age” has skyrocketed (countless studies were carried out on popularized and commercialized media/culture/politics, celebrity, spectacle, image, postmodern aestheticism, the “economies of sign,” marketing and PR, and consumption), a shift that corresponded with the most typical practices of post-Fordist capitalism (branding and image making, marketing, the aestheticization of services and commodities, centrality of information and communication and media services).

Scholars and industrial experts could not have gathered in a commonsense-making sphere had they not shared a great deal of their interpretive tools from the beginning. In the high modern era, academic and industrial thinking clearly stood on common modernist

grounds, even if the actual terms and concepts they applied differed significantly, due to the institutional separation of these fields. A good example is the field of television, where the theory of audience passivity, this typically modernist trope, had been generally accepted in academia and in industry during the broadcast era. However, due to a lack of interaction, the two professional communities used different terminologies and techniques to express their quasi-identical underlying vision on broadcast TV audiences. While TV industry experts dealt with audience passivity with heavily technicized concepts and practices (like Gross Ratings Points, audience inertia, Opportunity to See-based advertising, and Least Objectionable Programming), experts in academia expressed the very same idea with a different set of concepts, like cultivation, agenda setting, manipulation, strong effects, and so on.

The same sense of similarity-in-difference is lurking in Stuart Ewen's interesting interview (1996) with Edward L. Bernays, the pope of PR in America. As the founding father and highly renowned practitioner of modern PR, Bernays wrote several books that for decades had set the standard for the growing industry. Looking back on his early work, Bernays explained how struck he was by the quasi-equivalence between his thoughts and those that were expounded, although in very different words by Harold Lasswell, the author of a famous book on propaganda (*Propaganda Technique in the World War* [1927]), who has achieved the same eminence in the academic world as Bernays in the PR field. Similar observations have been made by a leading figure of media and public opinion research, Elihu Katz, who lamented in the early 1980s about how disconnected academic and industrial public opinion research was, in spite of their apparent conceptual and methodological overlaps.

The constellation of institutional separation and discursive overlap between academic and business experts was typical of high modernity, when arguably the same modernist discourse was cultivated in institutionally separated interpretive "silos." However, as the high modern institutions of social control (the academic ivory tower included) emptied and became obsolete, media and market experts in academia and in business fields were urged to steer through the so far impenetrable walls separating their institutional worlds. Experts convened in a shared space of common "modernist" sense making, which resulted in a veritable explosion of new scholarly/expert narratives about the new, "popular" age of media and capitalist society.

If Elihu Katz complained thirty years ago about institutional walls separating substantively similar discourses (industry and academia), what we see today is an unprecedentedly intense flow of concepts and theories and techniques across academic and business fields, a dense intellectual traffic that institutions themselves accelerate maximally. If we consider today's hottest expert concepts inside and outside academia—the “active” audience, “engagement,” “multitasking,” “experience,” “branding,” “spin,” “microtargeting,” “segmentation,” “surveillance,” and so on—what we find is that these notions and theories have been so much overused across expert fields that often it is not even possible to tell where they originate from. Most probably, they have been invented and reinvented many times, at many places. This shows well that popular media-interpreting institutions do not simply use modernist concepts today, but cultivate the same, commonly shared modernist “neopopular” discourse, which they maintain by regularly monitoring each other and borrowing each others' concepts and information.

Examples of how perfectly academic and business expertise has amalgamated could be cited with no limits. This discursive convergence manifests itself, for example, in the perfect intellectual harmony between media scholar Henry Jenkins and the engagement marketing “guru,” Alan Moore: it is interesting to observe indeed how the two experts took the words right out of each other's mouth when discussing the resonant powers of engagement marketing (Jenkins 2007). This industrial-scholarly harmony prevails not only in the case of the Jenkins-type new media enthusiasts: even the fiercest scholarly critics stand in a symbiotic relationship with the expert practitioners they criticize. It is highly evocative in this respect to see, for example, how much a critical author like Jay G. Blumler, or a theorist of propaganda like Gerald Sussman, a media industry critic like Joseph Turow, or a media philosopher like Mark Andrejevic rely on the accounts of experts-practitioners, as if these accounts reveal some direct evidence on how popular resonance-based social control works today.

In return for this inflowing evidence, the academic field has supplied popular cultural industries with experts highly trained in popular culture. Popular television today, as John Caldwell has noted, is highly dependent on this know-how, which leads to the fact that “the vast majority of university students who now learn and master semiotics,

continental literary theory, postcolonial theory, feminism, or cultural studies end up working and circulating in the corporate world” (Caldwell 2004).

The cross-fertilization of so-far secluded expert fields reveals an institutional symbiosis, a common interest in expert institutions to share knowledge. This symbiotic relationship has existed in all sub-fields, like political marketing, where it has incited “an increasingly active dialogue between academics and practitioners which have contributed to both theory, the practice of political marketing and associated processes such as lobbying, and approaches to regulation in these areas” (Harris and Lock 2010, 297). A key channel for interfield dialog has been the regular conferences where academics and practitioners gathered to exchange media and market evidence. To pick an example from my own country, the yearly conference series “Media Hungary” and “Internet Hungary” have become self-evident platforms for collective expert speculation, but these conferences of course pale in comparison to the intellectual and business force convening in America’s regular media and marketing conferences (Caldwell 2008).

The requirement to gather all intellectual armies in the same place reveals itself clearly in the announcement of MIT’s highly acclaimed Media in Transition Conference in 2015: “As at previous conferences, we invite proposals from teachers and scholars in many fields as well as artists, media makers, journalists and industry professionals. This mix of voices across disciplines, professions, and generations has always been a signature feature of these conferences. We hope for the same diversity and energy in 2015” (MIT 2015). As this excerpt suggest, the common norm has apparently become to share and to cross-fertilize. Today’s academics and business experts expect to amplify their intellectual powers by using each other as resources. The rising ethos of mutual knowledge production discredits former institutional borders and former expert antagonism—revealing the rise of a common discursive sphere in which the “new rules” of popular media-based and resonance-based social control are collectively invented.

The opening of a common sphere for collective speculation on “the popular” has induced two essential changes in the production of expert intelligence on popular media and late capitalist markets. The first process could be called the “media focusing” of the expert discourse on the popular. The discursive convergence between indus-

trial and academic experts and a wider set of intellectual observers has washed away the boundaries between market research and media research and management, marketing, and PR. In the fifth estate's emerging discourse on "popular control," it has become common wisdom that connecting and controlling popular audience-consumers requires an integrated understanding of mediatized markets and marketized media. This truly fundamental process will be explored in later in Chapter 5, where I will analyze a standard expert book on consumer behavior analysis (Solomon et al. 2002), which is less like a how-to manual and more like an academic book about popular media and cultural research. In the shared "neopopular" discourse of the fifth estate, popular media have been established as the prime driver of consumption, identity formation, self-realization, and mobilization.

The second transformation has brought the "scientificization" of popular resonance expertise. In the emerging system of mediatized and resonance-based popular control, the professional legitimacy of experts depended heavily on their ability to produce concrete and direct evidence on how popular loyalties grow out of popular resonances. The hunger of elite managers, experts, and academic researchers for documented evidence has been insatiable.

The shift has been apparent in the academic study of popular media, where, as Justin Lewis once noted, the dominant focus on textual analysis has been increasingly discredited since the late 1980s, with the objection that media content analysis lacks any direct proof about the actual reactions of actual audiences. The same ethos of direct evidence has been lurking behind the marketing concept of detecting and serving the will of the people. In a 2003 conference, marketing guru Philip Kotler asserted that "most television advertising is a waste of money," due to the fact that "many marketers are clueless about how effective their strategies are" (Kotler 2003, 5). By contrast, as Kotler has expressed in another piece about the political usages of his approach, marketing would enable parties to "to better understand what voters want and to give voters what they want" (Kotler 1983, vii). Increasingly, the professional ethos of directly revealing and gratifying popular affinities has been established as the new standard, which brought with itself the advent of new technologies of consumer behavior analysis, digital "tracking," opinion polls, and focus groups—all signaling the autonomization of a discursive sphere that cultivates its

inner professional rules to theorize, to detect, and to plan the making of “popular resonance.”

In spite of all the new (semi-)scientific methods and models promising a deeper, richer, more precise understanding of popular resonance, there are good reasons to argue that the process of scientification has impoverished actors’ understanding of the popular realm they wanted to connect and control. This is because fifth estate professionals, following the inner epistemic logic of their discursive field, have pushed to the limit the key idea justifying their existence: that popular resonance can be detected and exploited by (quasi-)scientific methods. By absolutizing this idea, fifth estate members have exposed themselves to the biases built into their discourse and blinded themselves to the more relaxed and more skeptical interpretive tradition of big institutional actors who, in their heyday, consistently resisted the idea that popular resonance could be directly measured and exploited. In the fever of evidence-based resonance making, fifth estate actors have sidelined the existing arguments against seeing popular resonance as a solid and self-sufficient tool of social control.

In the high modern era, the idea of popular resonance had not been absolutized into a Holy Grail of popular control: as we have seen, it had been regarded as a supplement to institutions’ established infrastructures. In modern politics, elected party officials have always used the tools of media image-based campaigning, however, they have vested more trust into their parties’ infrastructures when it came to political mobilization. A similar skepticism toward popular resonance making has characterized corporate managers who, as Michael Schudson reports, have seen TV advertising as a matter of ritual habit rather than that of rational calculation. “We advertise as we go to the church”—Schudson cites a manager whose words he feels express a typical attitude in the field. A similar skepticism toward evidence-based resonance making has been expressed in the words of BBC president Lord Reith who, in response to the critique arriving from commercial media actors, famously said: “It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need and not what they want—but few know what they want, and very few what they need” (Curran and Seaton 1988, 124).

Of course, if the journalists, party officers, corporate managers, or media managers take a distanced, relativistic position toward popular

resonance in the high modern era, they do so on the solid grounds of their “big institutions.” However, as this safe institutional hinterland has gradually dissolved, so have the actors’ defenses against an overstretched, absolutistic vision of resonance-based popular control. Media and market experts have increasingly postulated mediatized popular resonance as the ultimate force of social control and gradually enclosed themselves in their own speculative discursive sphere where nothing has been left in the name of which this new dogma could have been effectively questioned.

There is a sad irony in the fact that the fifth estate could emerge as a sphere of collective speculation due to the gathering of experts who hoped to find rescue from the uncertainties of popular resonance making in scientifically approved theories and methods that would surpass the level of mere speculation.

2.4. The Rise of the Fifth Estate, a “Field of Restricted Symbolic Production”

In the closing section of this chapter, I show with the help of Pierre Bourdieu that anomalies have appeared necessarily after the weakening of big institutions. The expansion of a “bubble-blowing” discursive field has been a structurally determined consequence of the dissolution of high modern infrastructures of “bureaucratic” social control that once represented an outside limit that restrained the discourse on popular resonance making.

The self-absolutizing tendency of the fifth estate is not unique at all, for the same trend may appear at various intellectual fields that are protected from outside criticism. Pierre Bourdieu in his seminal study on symbolic markets calls these self-enclosed enclaves “fields of restricted symbolic production.” The arts and sciences are typical examples of these enclaves, which can maintain their self-absorbed logic due to the fact that their actors produce symbolic goods so highly sophisticated that they are meaningful for initiated field actors only, and, consequently, can hardly be challenged by outside actors who lack the means of effective critique. The shriveling of critical resources that would moderate the drive of intellectual fields for self-sufficiency makes it easy for intellectuals to secure their institutional independence,

however, paradoxically, it also impedes their intellectual freedom. In addressing this key ambiguity, Bourdieu follows a dialectical model that is very similar to the one applied in this book.

For Bourdieu, of course, all fields of a differentiated modern society form relatively autonomous terrains where participants produce field-specific goods and compete with each other for field-specific forms of material or symbolic capital. What makes fields of “restricted production” even more autonomous is their separation from mass publics and mass markets (from which conventional fields of “large-scale” production depend [see Bourdieu 1993, 39]), due to the high delicacy of their symbolic goods and of their tools of symbolic production (methods, concepts, theories, technologies). Being defended from the judgment of the crowds but also that of political or economic elites, members of “restricted fields” gradually become the prime judges, consumers, and users of the symbolic goods that they produce, and the whole traffic of symbolic production develops a highly autonomous, self-referential logic. In the absence of outer critique, self-enclosurement feeds self-justification, which explains why the institutionalized freedom of academic and artistic fields systematically fails to maintain a space for genuine experimenting and unconstrained, radical innovation, and why, on the contrary, the safe fences around academia (arts and research) tend to maintain a rule of conformist “academism” inside the field.

In line with Bourdieu, I argue that the experts of “popular resonance” could create their own self-justifying “restricted field” due to the fact that the collapse of “big institutions” freed them from the only actors that could effectively challenge their expertise from the outside. In the 1980s and 1990s, it became obvious that market and media interpreters did not have to assist the operational logic of their client institutions and adapt their expertise to it any more, since, on the contrary, institutions themselves willingly adapted themselves to the newly established neopopular discourse of the fifth estate. The emerging practices of popular media-based control gradually overcame the former infrastructures of bureaucratic control: the logic of mass production and product advertisement surrendered to that of branding, marketing, and customization (Slater and Tonkiss 2001; Klein 2010), high journalism to popular journalism (Hallin 1992), the class-based mass party and its local party officers to the populist media party (Manin 1997),

the broadcast television channel to a much more complex televisual “production culture” (Caldwell 2008) and its creative/speculative “nodes.”

As big institutions lost the masses “available” for their bureaucratic infrastructures and had been adopted into the neopopular regime of popular media-based control represented by the “speculative centers,” they have gradually lost the ground on which to assess the worth of the market/media intelligence produced by popular media experts. With the weakening of the institutional context in which the worth of interpretive products (market segmentations, targeting strategies, theories on persuasion and mobilization, polling and focus group evidence, slogans, branded images, product development strategies, consumer behavior models) and the resulting sales or popularity figures be meaningfully assessed; the clients of media/market experts could no longer act as sovereign “consumers” of the media/market information they had purchased and, thus, had to delegate the task of retrospective (“consumerly”) judgment to the very same expert field that had created these products.

In the emerging speculative media system, fifth estate experts produce intelligence less for the sake of their clients than for each other: more than simply producing media/market information, they become the main consumers and judges of this information, since, they, and not their clients, possess the interpretive means to decide which information is worth listening to and which strategy works in light of empirical data. Combining the role of producer and consumer of media and market intelligence, the protagonists of the fifth estate coalesced into a self-enclosed sensemaking field, a “field of restricted symbolic production” that is able to defend itself from all challenges coming from the outside since it is able to process reality feedback through its interpretive filters and to impose this filtered evidence on their clients.

The above collapse of the “bureaucratic” distinction between producers and consumers of media and market intelligence started decades ago and has amplified itself further and further. In a recent article about algorithmic control technologies in digital media and advertising, Nick Couldry and Joseph Turow (2014, 1712) describe evocatively how the intensifying digital tracking of the popular media audience has blurred a similar distinction between media planning and buying (“the strategic consideration and provision of funds to pay for placement of the

notice”) and evaluation research (“determining whether and how the message worked”). This distinction, of course, had been dubious from the beginnings, given that evaluation was made by the very same ad industry that orchestrated the ad campaigns. However, in the data fever of the last two decades, even this (a priori questionable) distinction has been blurred as both planners and evaluators become dependent on experts of audience tracking and web analytics, a newly emerging fraction of the fifth estate which is taking over both above functions.

Mainstream scholarly research of mediatized politics has failed to address seriously the intensifying collision of producerly and consumer/client/evaluator roles in the traffic of intelligence on media audiences. On the contrary, political marketing—like other expertly intermediating institutions—have been thought to work as “a well-established industry, with a host of technical resources . . . to serve commercial . . . and political strategists in finding the right audience at the right price” (Gandy 1998, 8). But who tells whether or not the “right” audience has indeed been “found,” whether the price has been “right,” and what it means to “find” an audience at all, if not the same above industry that orchestrates the strategies of “finding”? On what grounds could fifth estate experts correct their own errors? Isn’t it plausible to expect that experts are primarily interested in justifying their own discursive framework, and will filter out all audience feedback unfitting the frame? Unfortunately, the possibility of this hardly evitable reflexive loop—clearly a potential source of serious distortions—has mostly been neglected in mainstream scholarly research.

The above reflexive loop has allowed the key fifth estate actors to establish their discursive field as a sovereign power center—and to gradually inflate their neopopular discourse into a self-referential “bubble.” The resulting interference between “collective speculation” and “reality” is a new structural anomaly in late modernity—one that was not apparent in the time of Bourdieu’s analysis. Above the primary “fields of large-scale production” (as Bourdieu has called them), speculative secondary “fields of restricted production” have emerged which effectively allocate all information about the former fields and interfere with their everyday operation.

This anomaly reveals itself in today’s media realm, which forms—similarly to marketized finance—a “speculative” system that consists of two relatively autonomous spheres: a primary sphere of media produc-

tion, distribution, and consumption, where the symbolic products circulate among mass-scale publics, and a “restricted,” secondary sphere which allocates information about the circuits of the first sphere, provides its actors with this information, but cannot be held accountable for its interpretive-speculative products that only its actors are authorized to judge.

The main structural danger of the process is that the more the interpretive work of a secondary sphere is “restricted” to the expertly priests of collective speculation on the popular, the more this work downgrades to a conformist “academism” that delimits real innovation and, instead, rewards a self-enclosed competition of intellectual accomplices. As Bourdieu argues in relation to academia,

[b]y an effect of circular causality, separation and isolation engender further separation and isolation, and cultural production develops a dynamic autonomy. Freed from the censorship and auto-censorship consequent on direct confrontation with a public foreign to the profession, and encountering within the corps of producers itself a public at once of critics and accomplices, it tends to obey its own logic, that of the continual outbidding inherent to the dialectic of cultural distinction. (1993, 115)

Most important for us is Bourdieu’s observation that although the logic of “cultural outbidding” is a prime driving force that urges the members of restricted fields to continuous innovation, this form of development can hardly bring with itself the true renewal of the field. In restricted fields, all actors have to innovate all the time; still, the possibility of real and radical innovation is very limited: instead of inciting substantive change, “the logic of the dialectic of distinction is continually liable to degenerate into an anomic quest for difference at any price” (Bourdieu 1993, 117). This is due to the fact that field actors, who know well that they are allowed to innovate only in compliance with the field’s sanctified inner codes, spend most of their energies to prove that renewal and difference are possible inside the field. The flawed dynamics of inward-looking renewal discourages truly self-reflexive, paradigmatic debates, and instead it urges actors to refine and elaborate further and further on each other’s work inside the safe boundaries of the field. In the fifth estate just as in academia, intellectual work folds into “academism.”

Here we have tapped on the roots of the neo-orthodoxy of the fifth estate. The self-absorbed logic described by Bourdieu immunizes restricted fields against threatening impulses that could menace the dominant discursive order on which (and only on which!) rests the status and legitimacy of field members. The field, then, is able to defend itself from its members' inner revolts, but also from challenges arriving from the outside. The self-absorbed dynamics of innovation urges field actors to continuously refine, reconfigure, and expand their well-proven models. This urge to reconfigure "orthodox" methods into "neo-orthodox" innovations allows the field to adapt itself to its continuously transforming external environment. However, this adaptation is primarily achieved by absorbing emerging social reality into the field's reconfigured, neo-orthodox taxonomies, and not by questioning the field's sanctified discourse in the name of changing reality.

The dialectic of cultural distinction in restricted fields results in "academism" because it sidelines all challenges that cannot be domesticated into the field's discourse and erects hardly penetrable walls between intellectual labor and social reality. Bourdieu's theory of restricted fields forecasts a necessary alienation between social life and intellectual reflection, if the actors of the former do not have the means of effectively criticizing and counterweighing the separating tendencies of the latter. No other diagnosis could better fit the autonomization of the fifth estate. As has been shown, the modernist discourse on the popular is an established discourse that for long had existed in subordination to high modern "big institutions" but forcefully broke out, amplified itself, and multiplied its force in reaction to the weakening of the pyramidal model of social control these institutions had represented. Freed from outside control, neopopular media interpreters have inflated a "speculative bubble" and cut themselves off from the emerging media reality they themselves have partly created.

2.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the historic process in which the fifth estate has emerged as an autonomous sensemaking sphere that is driven by its own inner logic, akin to the arts and sciences. I have mostly focused on the high ends of the fifth estate: its most apparent

and institutionalized elite actors in PR, political consultancy, marketing, or academia. The higher we climb in the fifth estate, the more elite institutions of neopopular speculation we focus upon, the more our case seems to suit Bourdieu's analysis on academia as a "field of restricted production." Among the elite experts who have the most power to inflate today's neopopular bubble, the "dialectic of cultural distinction" has indeed fed a process of conformist innovation, a self-justifying "academism" that aims to grasp social reality by producing newer and newer "neo-orthodox" narratives (see Part 2).

At the same time, we should not forget that elite expert institutions, as I have argued in Chapter 1, are only the top of a mythical iceberg: they express and make more sophisticated what a much larger collective of professional or semi-professional interpreters (e.g., researchers of related fields, past research, journalists, bloggers, or civil watchdogs) mythically "know" about popular media. The fifth estate, thus, has to be grasped as a discursive sphere of collective speculation or mythmaking; it is much wider than its expert "high ends," but it is also more diffuse and less institutionalized, which follows naturally from its collective scale and power. The fifth estate, of course, could not exist without its elite players, who were the focus of this chapter. The neopopular discourse that these elite institutions represent, however, is not their invention: it is a collective myth that feeds from a commonly shared modernist tradition.

To grasp the binding power of modernist collective myths in today's age of liquid modernity, we need to open up Bourdieu's model of academia as a restricted field toward a more general theory about the autonomization of collective (neomodern, neopopular) mythmaking in late modern society.

Chapter 3

Theorizing Collective Mythmaking on Media and Markets

This chapter theorizes the autonomization of collective mythmaking on “liquid control” (free market-driven and popular media-driven social-economic control) in late modern society. As I have argued previously, the mythicization of liquid control has emerged as a self-propelled, collective sensemaking process since the bureaucratic, pyramidal institutions of high modernity had been discredited as effective means of social control and actors have commonly engaged in a quest for the new principles of control in postbureaucratic times. Elites have erected new infrastructures of “liquid control,” prominently free markets and popular media, that have been grasped as efficient and powerful tools of social control in our “liquid” era. However, as the 2008 breakdown has clearly manifested, the new infrastructures of liquid control can hardly frame social life as solidly as “big institutions” once could. The idea that (neoclassical, neoliberal, financial) free market infrastructures represent a powerful regime of late capitalist economy has proved to be a powerful myth rather than a true model of late capitalism. The same suspicion can reasonably be extended to mediatized populist democracy and its dysfunctional infrastructure of media-based political control. The post-2008 critique developed in this book proposes to turn away from free markets and popular media themselves (and the modernist questions of what they do to society or what society does with them), for the sake of challenging, instead, the collective myths that depict them as effective means of “liquid control”

and that shape the actions of all those who use or suffer, celebrate or criticize these emerging liquid infrastructures.

Seen from the post-2008 approach of this book, what the late modern/late capitalist processes of “liquidization” (marketization and mediatization) have produced in the first place is not a new “regime” but new and self-maintaining “enclaves” where the new order is commonly mythicized. These “secondary” spheres of reflection (like derivative markets, or academic economics, or the fifth estate), where actors commonly speculate on the “real” or “primary” (“fundamental”) circuits of marketized and mediatized life, have become sovereign structural forces in late modernity. In these enclaves of collective speculation, actors commonly cultivate neomodern myths about free markets and popular media.

Standard social theory has been ill-prepared to the rise of self-sustained “enclaves” of collective mythmaking that follow their orthodox modernist tropes in interpreting and inventing the “new age” of liquid modernity. Enclaves of collective speculation have been severely under-reflected because they contradict the social constructionist common sense of many social theories. Standard social theoretical approaches have assumed that the work of inventing and interpreting the “new age” harmonizes—in some way or another—with the systemic reality that is being invented and interpreted. Accordingly, scholars have depicted the protagonists of free markets and popular media as the “constructors” and masters of a new world, harmoniously connected to and embedded in the newly invented, liquid systems of social control. Mainstream narratives, standing on the grounds of the pre-2008 imagery of a triumphant liquid capitalism, have assumed that its newly emerging systems are interpreted and invented inside the “dominant” mental framework (paradigm or ideology or self-identity) of the age that harmonizes with the prevalent socioeconomic order of late modern society. Seen from standard approaches, the professional actors who play a key role in the new “liquid” systems are the masters of the emerging systems they partly invent and partly follow.¹ However, this

¹ The association of the new system and the “dominant” interpretive mindset of its invention and analysis follows logically from the centuries-old discourse of modernism which based social analysis on a set of privileged oppositions, like the ones of social structure and individual agency, order and freedom, dominance and resistance. It is in this taxonomic framework that actors have

is a misunderstanding that reveals the intimate connections between scholarly accounts and the assumptions of practitioners themselves (PR experts, pollsters, politicians, journalists, bloggers) who all claimed to have a “masterly” knowledge about how the alchemies of profit making/popularity work in a marketized/mediatized environment.

The standard accounts of scholars and practitioners have been blind to the fact that the protagonists of the new “liquid” systems are embedded into and bound by the centuries-old collective interpretive tradition of modernism, which is a pregiven, external force to the new systems that are being invented or interpreted with its help. The collectively accepted conventions of modernist social analysis—the modernist discourse on “the popular,” on the market, on social control and freedom—bind the efforts of all actors who aim to invent or understand the new “liquid” system of late modernity. The collective modernist mythicization of liquid modernity represents a broader problem than the established (modernist) concepts of dominant ideology or paradigm, since it entails both dominant and oppositional positions at the same time. The collective force of the modernist tradition interweaves most of the positions that can possibly be taken in relation to free markets and popular media, and preframes the space of antagonism in which debates on media and markets can be fought. The “orthodox” conventions of the modernist tradition preframe the interpretation of the “new age” and incite a collective mythmaking which departs from the “liquid” systemic realities it aims to unravel.

Standard modernist theory has underestimated the incongruence, since it assumed that a basic harmony prevails between interpretation and systemic reality. This harmony has been grasped in different ways by the three most typical modernist theories of late modern society: those of “reflexivity,” “indoctrination,” and “performativity.” Theories of reflexivity have assumed that a harmony between system and interpretation prevails due to the creative, adaptive, self-corrective abilities of the individual actor-agent who flexibly adapts herself to her systemic

discussed the eternal modernist dilemma of social control (see Chapter 4). In this modernist framework, newly emerging dominant systems are created, and, once created, are handled by the dominant interpretive mindset of the social era. The whole taxonomic system encloses the interpreter into the logic of systems and actors—and excludes collective forces from the equation.

environment. Theories of indoctrination have stressed that structurally dominant forces are able to preframe individual consciousness in which ideological forces secure the harmony between actors' minds and systemic forces. Synthesizing the two approaches, the notion of performativity stresses the dynamics of mutual cocreation in which creative avant-gardes initiate new infrastructures that are reflexively and gradually appropriated by a growing number of actors in a process that would "perform" a new reality populated with a new type of actor.

In the field of popular media, the professional experts and interpreters of "the popular" have mostly been depicted from three theoretical viewpoints: either as reflexive experts or as ideologue-manipulators or as creative inventors of the popular media system. The first interpretation of "popular" experts draws upon theories of reflexive modernization (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Thrift 1998), according to which in late modernity, the outer constraints of social life have become questionable and deserving of reflection, and social actors have become self-reflexive bricoleurs of their own cultural or political identities. Seen from this angle, expert media interpreters appear as (self-)reflexive and highly competent cultural mediators between public actors, media or cultural producers, and "empowered" popular audiences (Papathanassopoulos et al. 2007; Lilleker and Lees-Marshment 2005; Scammell 1999). The second view of media interpreters relates to various critical theories of "indoctrination" (for a review, see Schudson 2002), which have grasped media as a subordinating power, and theorized them either in terms of manipulation and propaganda, or from a classical political economical approach, or with poststructuralist notions like hegemony and governmentality. Seen from this view, media interpreters appear as a new type of agent whose task is to pour new fuel into the old media machinery, to invent new techniques for promoting particularistic interests or legitimizing capitalist ideologies (Bourdieu 1998; Miller and Dinan 2000; Morris and Goldsworthy 2008). Finally, a third possible vision of popular media interpreters depicts them (mainly experts in advertising, marketing, and branding) as world creators, inventors of the new "order" or "regime" of post-Fordism where the value of commodities increasingly depends on their symbolic aura established in the popular media realm. Some important accounts on "cultural intermediaries" could be ranged into this category—even if the term performativity itself is rarely connected to the world of popular media actors and

professionals. (Moor 2008; Smith and Matthews 2010) These three key modernist approaches have commonly assumed that the sensemaking work of experts harmonizes with the systemic conditions of late modern media.² Modernist accounts have grasped popular media interpreters as reflexive “heralds” or builders or effective ideologues of the popular media system, rather than its self-justifying mythicizers who push their self-absorbed collective discourse that is chronically incongruent with the system that it interprets.

In contrast to the three standard scholarly approaches, I will propose a fourth theoretical position that is able to sensitively reveal the abyss between media system and media interpretation. This fourth position will highlight the self-propelled collective conventions that shape the interpretation of popular media. The proposed model on the “cultural autonomy of collective mythmaking” serves as a counterpole to the mainstream theories of reflexivity, indoctrination, and performativity. The proposed approach suggests that collective speculation on markets and media operates independently from the strategies of individual agents and the material and status structures of society, and it harbors destabilizing mythmaking processes that are diametrically opposed to the alleged performative cocreation of agents and structures. Collective mythmaking proceeds independently of the external conditions of the reality that is being mythicized.

Collective speculation has grown to an autonomous process due the fact that its “modernist” sensemaking structures (taxonomies, models, concepts) are trusted and unquestioned enough to exert a gravitational pull on various actors who engage in an intense information exchange and convene in commonsense-making “enclaves.” Akin to Bourdieu’s academic “fields of restricted symbolic production,” speculative enclaves harbor “restricted,” self-enclosed processes

² This underlying harmony has been thought to manifest itself in various ways. The reflexivity approach has suggested that media experts precisely discern the potentials and constraints of the popular media system and effectively appropriate this system by developing themselves and learning from their mistakes. The indoctrination model has highlighted the power of media interpreters to run effective campaigns and to serve the interests of the media industry and the political-economic elite. Meanwhile, the cultural intermediary model has suggested that popular media interpreters play a key and unavoidable role in the operation of post-Fordist economy.

of knowledge production about the “fundamentals” of marketized and mediatized fields. At the same time, their scope extend far beyond the closed institutional fences of academia, and comprise a much broader sphere in which all sorts of actors and observers produce common knowledge (scholars, industry experts, speculating actors, journalists, semi-professional commentators, and so on).

In a postbureaucratic liquid environment, the “enclaves” of collective speculation are able to define for elites how to control actors and for actors how to evade or exploit elite control. This means that collective mythmaking discourses have grown into social institutions that have taken over the power of high modern “big institutions” to produce the legitimate representations of social reality and the rules of acceptable behavior in this reality. The proposed approach suggests that collective mythmaking discourses about the new rules of marketized and mediatized society have become sovereign and binding “culture structures” (Alexander and Smith 2003) that can shape late modern social life with a similar force to that of bureaucratic institutions in the high modern age.³

³ Of course, my point that the two general processes of collective mythmaking on free markets and popular media have grown into postbureaucratic social institutions on their own does not mean that their inner order and external boundaries would be as clearly set as academia or the bureaucratic institutions of high modernity. The collective mythicization of free markets and popular media has been just as fuzzy a process as the creation of market and media infrastructures. Accordingly, it is important to note that the “free market bubble” and the “popular media bubble” have not been inflated in entirely identical ways. The mythicization of the popular has taken place in a wide and relatively coherent discursive “enclave,” called the “fifth estate” in this book. This “enclave” can certainly be divided to various and relatively separate subspheres (e.g., political marketing does not have to be directly linked to discourses on celebrity or social media). However, it is clear that these “subenclaves” talk a common language and take part in a collective process of mythicizing “the people” and “the popular.”

Unlike the “neopopular bubble,” the free market “bubble” has been inflated in more separate “subenclaves” (e.g., neoliberal, neoconservative, neoclassical discourses, financial markets) that I have deliberately not referred to with a common umbrella concept. The technical language and self-contained problematics of academic economics or financial risk assessment or ideological debates may often conceal the common mythical resources they all draw upon. Although there are good reasons to argue that in these often separated arenas, the same neo-orthodox modernist myths have been articulated in different forms, it is certainly not the task of this book to system-

The main aim of this chapter is to draw a theoretical model to grasp the cultural autonomy of the fifth estate as a mythmaking “enclave.” First, I will turn to the study of finance and the free market economy, which is far ahead of media research in recognizing the sovereign, structural role of collective sensemaking conventions in liquid capitalism. Second, I will show why the emergence of collective mythmaking as a structural force overwrites the social constructionist common sense and requires new approaches. Third, I will argue that unraveling the discursive codes of collective mythmaking on popular media is an absolutely vital task that mainstream research has consistently failed to accomplish. Fourth, I will deploy my approach to unraveling the collective codes of mythicization that produces our collective representations on popular media (as prominent channels of popular control, as “larger than life” forces of either oppression or empowerment). The proposed approach will be called a “strong media mythology,” since it attributes to collective myths on popular media a “strong”—that is, autonomous and self-justifying—power to reproduce themselves and shape social life.

3.1. The Free Market Belief System as Collective Myth

In this section I focus uniquely on scholarly reactions to the 2008 financial breakdown, with the aim of presenting how in the last years a refreshingly new approach has started to take shape that explains the crisis with the inevitable and hardly correctable flaws of collective knowledge production. Critical interest in collective delusions opens new avenues that lead beyond the standard, “modernist” criticisms (which are limited, as it will be argued, due to their complicity with the neoclassical, neoliberal mythicization of free markets).

atically define this common mythical core. It will be supposed, of course, that these specific arenas cultivate overlapping subsets of the same collective myths, share their sensemaking conventions, and, thus, their kaleidoscopic “ensemble” can be grasped as an “enclave” of collective speculation similar to the fifth estate. This “bubble hypothesis” can be backed with existing scholarly work (to be presented in a moment) which highlights the key driving role of collective conventions that shape the interpretive and strategic moves of competing actors in the debates over neoclassical economics and over neoliberalism and in the pursuit of profits at financial markets.

In public and scholarly debates, the 2008 breakdown has been widely associated with the fall of free market infrastructures and the so far dominant belief system behind them. In critical literature, the fallen “free market belief system” has either been depicted as a faulty paradigm (neoclassical economics) or as a dysfunctional dominant ideology (neoliberalism). The first approach presents the free market belief system as a correctable mental model, and, thus, corresponds with theories of “reflexive” agency. The second approach corresponds with theories of ideological indoctrination.

In the public criticism of the pre-2008 world, the most visible strand has been that of moderate critics who have conceived of the free market belief system as a distorted economics paradigm that needed self-reflexive correction. Among the most prominent critics of “the ruling free-market paradigm” (Stiglitz 2010b, 17) we find Nobel laureates like Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, or Robert Shiller, each being somewhat heterodox but undoubtedly central figures of neoclassical economics. Seen from their point of view, the free market belief system reads as a “romanticized and sanitized vision of the economy” that too many neoclassical economists, enmeshed in their “all-encompassing, intellectually elegant approach,” “mistook . . . for truth” (Krugman 2009). Each proponent of this approach has had an idea about where to find (e.g., in irrational manias [Shiller 2005] or in information asymmetries [Stiglitz 2010b]) the mismatch between messy market realities and the neat models that attribute to markets full transparency, unperturbed information flow, and rational actors. At the same time, the same thinkers have also believed that by unraveling the flaws of the paradigm, they can “design policies to prevent crises or to deal with them when they occur” (Stiglitz 2010b). In this moderate, reformist view, economists and actors are able to self-reflexively rethink their models and, thus, to eliminate the incongruence of the free market paradigm and economic reality. Reestablishing the harmony between economy and economics, system and interpretation, would allow the flawed economic policies at global and national levels to heal and to transform the existing system into a better and more sustainable one.⁴

⁴ The reformist ferment has reached even the most influential neo-orthodox actors, like the World Bank, which has published its 2015 World Development Report under the title “Mind, Society, and Behavior”—explicitly

Neo-Marxist political economists, by contrast, have claimed that the ruling orthodoxy of efficient free markets is not merely a faulty cognitive model, but the prime ideological pillar behind the neoliberal restructuring of late capitalist society and economy. The most famous representatives of this approach are David Harvey (2005), Chris Harman (2010), Robert Brenner (2006), Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy (2011), and Colin Crouch (2011) (for review, see Parker 2012; Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012). Unlike in the paradigm approach, the gap that opens between the free market belief system and economic reality is fully functional, since it holds social actors in a state of false consciousness and fuels the elite fabric of today's "market- and corporation-led society" (Crouch 2011, 144).⁵ These authors point out that even the shocking debacle of the free market model in 2008 could not undermine neoliberal ideology and rehabilitate the state regulation of finance or labor. Given this basic (although somewhat perturbed⁶)

asserting that future development policies should be calibrated to real-world people and not to the abstracted market actors postulated in standard economic models (World Bank 2015).

⁵ Political economists have pointed to various terrains where the ideological celebration of a utopian "free market age" has served to veil or justify capitalist class interests. One critical argument has claimed that free market ideology serves to mask the state's assistance in stabilizing the uncontrolled power of oligopolistic multinational corporations. Another argument points out that the ideological vision about the perfect efficiency of financial markets has served to veil their risks—and, thus, justified the massive transfer of capital from productive investments to financial speculation from the 1970s onward (in reaction to the falling profit rates in industrial production). A third claim has been that common belief in the efficiency of liberalized finance has justified another key aspect of late capitalist economy, namely that demand for goods is chronically weak (due to the overall freezing of wages since the 1970s) and an increasing amount of demand is financed on personal debt, which works as an artificial engine in the economy, bringing quick profits for producers but undermining the whole economy in the long run. Finally, the faith in efficient markets, it has also been argued, serves the interests of financial capitalists, a newly emerging fraction of the global capitalist class that fights against productive capital.

⁶ Neo-Marxist critics have all observed that the gap between deceptively utopian market representations and economic reality does not stay "unpunished": crises and bubble bursts and devaluations follow inevitably from the rule of a deceptive ideology. However, critics have argued, these shocks so far have not undermined capitalist power centers in any serious way. It is important to note that political economists have held different views on how

harmony between the late capitalist “base” and its neoliberal “super-structure,” leftist critics have warned, the free market ideology will continue to shape economic policy. Its disharmony with reality weighs less than its more fundamental harmony with dominant power interests.

The third modernist theory, that of performativity, did not have much to say about the 2008 crisis. For long, performativity theory has been praised for its potential to break with the binarizing modernist narratives opposing individual agency and structural determination, and show, instead, how agency and structure emerge circularly in different material contexts where economic actors “actualize,” or “speak to life,” so to say, the economic world they envision (Callon 1998, 2007, 2010; MacKenzie and Millo 2003). However, this model can hardly deal with the process where economic actors collectively create a world that persistently deviates from the recipes of its creation. The performativity thesis presumes a process of harmonious cocreation, which is antithetical to the phenomena of speculative bubbles departing from “fundamental” reality. Performativity theory would hardly allow for such a systemic alienation: it allows frictions between intellectual labor and reality to exist only as marginal, contextual breaks, inevitable “misfires” in the work of world creation (Callon 2010). However, if the late capitalist age is speculative by essence, as its post-2008 imagery suggests, it calls for a theory of “counterperformativity” (MacKenzie 2006), that logically leads back to the classical sociological question of how unreflected collective (cultural) conventions shape economic behavior (MacKenzie 2011). This is diametrically opposed to the original program of performativity (which rejects the conventional point of the economy being embedded in society for the sake of the contrary argument that social life is economized and rationalized).

efficient the neoliberal project has been. There is no doubt that immense amounts of invested money has disappeared in the collapse and the following devaluations. Meanwhile, it is also clear that governments have compensated for these losses by using public debt, and the so far neoliberal political forces have not had to face serious political resistance since 2008. Due to the latter considerations, most political economists have contemplated on the “strange non-death of neoliberalism” (Crouch 2011)—its resilience as the dominant ideology of the late capitalist era, its continued power to enforce capitalist class interests in the management of the economic crisis that it had caused.

Although each standard model recognizes that a certain disharmony may exist between the textbook model of efficient markets and economic reality, they also maintain that below these incongruences, some basic harmony prevails. However, there are good reasons to argue that the problem of market interpretations deviating from market realities may be a more fundamental problem: more radical and inevitable, more hurtful and less correctable than standard theories would suggest. In late modernity, the “secondary” spheres of collective speculation harbor sensemaking processes that alienate from the “primary” fields they speculate upon. To address the alienation of collective speculation from “fundamentals,” we need to fully deploy the self-justifying symbolic power of the collective conventions that shape knowledge production on free market reality. What we need to understand is how these conventions can maintain self-justifying collective myths that enclose themselves in their own universe.

The proposed understanding of the free market belief system as a collective myth deviates from each “modernist” model. First, grasping free market beliefs as collective myths means to recognize that these beliefs are not simply faulty mindsets, irrational manias, wrong models, or false information that could simply be evaded or corrected once actors/regulators/scholars take the trouble of processing complex and unexpected market information in a truly self-reflexive way. For, as George Soros has convincingly argued, reflexivity—in a liquid context such as that of unrestrained market speculation (1998, 2009)—has above all a recursive character: the more efforts actors make to be “reflexive,” the more they get enmeshed in the web of their unreflected sensemaking tools (the neo-orthodox tools of modernist mythmaking, in this book’s terms). Second, a collective myth approach refuses to see the free market belief system as a dominant ideology that would cheat actors into a state of “false consciousness.” On the contrary, collective myths may equally cheat power elites who use these myths to exert control over the population and oppositional forces who use the same myths to take control back. An example is the 2008 crunch which made one-third of the wealth of the top 1 percent evaporate. This elite recovered and quickly made up its losses, however, this development has been not so much due to the widespread acceptance of their “dominant” ideology, but rather to the lack of space for effective opposition. It is as if neoliberals and their antagonists made part of a mythical

constellation of predefined options, one that simply does not allow oppositional forces to take over, come what may. In the mythical field of “legitimate controversy,” neither the ruler, nor the subordinate can easily get rid of their pregiven sensemaking tools—which destabilize the position of both, and still, allow for rulers to keep their chaotic powers. Third, I suggest that free market beliefs are collective myths and not futuristic or utopian models that would be envisioned and “talked to life” by reformist avant-gardes who could adjust society and economy to their preferred models. On the contrary, it seems that processes of collective mythicization “perform” chaotic realities which defy the higher order envisioned by the believers of the new age.

The proposed understanding of the free market belief system as a “collective myth” (which forecasts the book’s main thesis that popular media related beliefs are collective myths) resonates with a new strand of critique that has highlighted the prime role of collective conventions in shaping the ideas and strategies actors cultivate in relation to free markets.⁷ Around the concepts of collective (mis)beliefs, collective (mis)representations, and (self-)deceptions an alternative field of critique has emerged in the past few years, indeed, a new ground for challenging the free market belief system and its dominant representatives, neoclassical economics, neoliberalism, and speculative financial markets. Protagonists of the new approach (Mirowski 2013a; Orléan 2014; Soros 2009; MacKenzie 2006, 2011; Bryan et al. 2012) have not defined themselves as a new current, however, a minimal connection between them can certainly be found in their common interest in the collective aspect of free market beliefs and in their choice to experiment with new forms of critique, instead of taking more predictable and long-established critical positions.

The emerging research field on the collective conventions regulating the production of free market beliefs has unraveled how these conventions tend to incite enclavelike sensemaking processes that lose their connections to the reality they refer to. The self-enclosing tenden-

⁷ “Collectivist” critiques of the free market belief system do not constitute a coherent and clean-cut approach. However, they represent important steps toward unraveling the logic of collective mythmaking on free markets, and, thus, are key reference points for the this book’s similar attempt to deploy the collective making of popular media myths.

cies of collective knowledge production on the free market economy can be ranged into four types, which I call *self-propelling*, *self-justification*, *self-purification*, and *self-destruction*. These four layers of collective mythmaking will be addressed in the following, since they are directly relevant to the “neopopular” discourse which has mythicized popular media along the very same directions.

SELF-PROPELLED TENDENCIES IN COLLECTIVE SENSE MAKING

Some “collectivist” accounts have suggested that economic thinking is moved above all by the mutual hatred of academic/intellectual tribes (Bryan et al. 2012; Mirowski 2013a). Accordingly, collective knowledge production about the free market constitutes a binding (mythical) discourse in which thinkable positions are determined in advance and any position gains its prime justification from the negation of its antagonist. Debates about the free market are mostly driven by the self-propelled antagonism of mutually exclusive theoretical options (state versus market, public versus private investment, high versus low taxes, regulation versus deregulation, national protection versus global free trade, Tobin tax versus liquid finance, etc.).

The self-fueled logic puts competing actors in a very delicate position, due to the fact that they may occupy antagonistic positions, however, they are also interested in cooperating with each other, in commonly maintaining their positions, which would be meaningless without each other, which justify each other and closely gravitate around each other. Seen from this view, the field of conventionally framed controversy about the free market turns antagonists into cooperating-competing accomplices who, in a certain state of psychological fixation, are obsessed with dueling with each other—but only with their commonly agreed favorite weapons, at their commonly agreed favorite places.

This vision, depicting the neoclassical/neoliberal mainstream and its heterodox challengers as fractious accomplices, lurks behind Paul Mirowski’s characterization of neoliberalism as a Russian-doll-like “thought collective” (emphatically not “dominant ideology” [2013a]), that has a general pull from which even leftist critics—like Occupy, or Keynesians, even Marxists—are not immune (2013b). A very similar idea informs the study of Bryan et al., who have argued that the “col-

lective failure” (2012, 304) of economist tribes has not only caused 2008, but also blocks the renewal of academia since the crisis broke.

The academic response to crisis has more generally gravitated to conservatism because familiar problematics are the lens through which unexpected new events are being understood. . . . [As a result,] the crisis is often an opportunity for settling old scores with opponents and establishing that contrarians were right all along. . . . In such cases there is a danger that a response to financial crisis can be too readily framed in a way that reconfirms analytical presuppositions, even though pre-2008 analyses built on those presuppositions had often failed to capture the dimensions that were leading to crisis. In a world where social scientific knowledge is Balkanized, we must shortly reach the point where each academic affinity group will have translated financial crisis into its own language and explained it to its own satisfaction. (Bryan et. al 2012)

The very problem with such a collective battlefield, as Mirowski has argued, is that it is arranged in a way that deprives oppositional voices from the means of effective critique. Collective belief systems (as I will argue in Part 2 in detail) tend to simplify key dilemmas to clean-cut opposition in which hegemonic views and counterhegemonic critique are simply negative mirrors of each other and heterodoxy is subordinate. This scenario is very unfavorable for oppositional voices, who are bound to lose as long as they complicitly follow the collective game book and cannot establish a new ground for the game (as explained in this book’s introduction). Collective conventions of sense making maintain predefined dominant and oppositional positions and, thus, can hardly be substantively transformed from the inside.

SELF-JUSTIFYING TENDENCIES IN COLLECTIVE SENSE MAKING

Collective conventions of knowledge production can equally hardly be challenged from the outside, since they provide actors with sophisticated means of self-justification that paralyze those vital feedback mechanisms that would face actors with discordant information in light

of which they could readjust their behavior. Competing-cooperating accomplices are interested in bracketing off all evidence that is discordant with the commonsensical conventions of their restricted competition at the commonly maintained battlefield—and they have all the means they need for this bracketing.

However, the feedback deficit of conventionally regulated knowledge production is rooted much deeper than in banal professional interests (that Bourdieu tends to overstress in his analyses). As André Orléan has demonstrated, in a radically “liquidized” and uncertain context like that of security markets, it is simply impossible to get solid feedback about the real value of financial products. If speculating actors commonly fly to virtual skies, this cannot solely be explained by their malign interests or mental fixations, but also by the fact that it is impossible to get a realistic judgment of market value independently of the collective conventions of its estimation. In a “liquid” financial environment, the market value of economic actors can only be assessed imitatively, “speculatively,” that is, based not on fundamental market value itself but on investors’ collective judgment of market value. Orléan’s analysis convincingly “demonstrates how problematic the concept of fundamental value is [in a ‘liquidized’ context]. It can be made to prove almost anything one likes” (2014, 280).

This is what happened before 2008, when the wrong belief that a simultaneous collapse of secluded local housing markets is impossible was supported by loads of substantive (academic and industrial) evidence and rose into a “collective belief” that justified investors’ herd instincts of joining the rally of constantly rising house prices. The collective belief that growth is sustainable, Orléan argues, has become “a valuation convention [that] has the nature of a norm that falls on everyone. Not only does it determine what is legitimate, its determinations are beyond challenge” (2014, 235).⁸ These collective conventions

⁸ If the real estate bubble before 2008 had been so widely ignored, this was not merely because it was simply dissimulated (either by malign issuers of toxic assets or by a dominant ideology or paradigm), but the fact that existing evidence was simply not strong enough to decisively support the (at the time) counterintuitive view that real estate prices are so much overvalued that they may suddenly drop all over America. Based on a 2007 article, Orléan argues that “academic research available in 2006 was basically

can develop a binding force because the models and evidence which support them cannot be falsified. It is as if “fundamental reality” was too weak to prove them wrong “on the fly”—and such a proof could only be collected retrospectively, after the apparent collapse.

In a “liquid” context where “fundamental” reality is a haunting spirit with no palpable existence, the interpretive efforts that try to assess it are urged to develop more and more inclusive, all-encompassing models in order to catch this hidden reality. In such a context, where real-world feedback cannot be decisive for structural reasons, the ever-developing explanatory models necessarily pump themselves into unfalsifiable myths that are able to adjust all reality feedback to their own epistemic logic, instead of adjusting themselves to unexpected feedback.⁹

inconclusive and could not convincingly support or refute any hypothesis about the future path of asset prices. Thus, investors who believed that house prices were going to fall could find evidence to support their position, while those who wanted to believe that house prices would continue to rise could not be dissuaded either. There were reasonable arguments on both sides” (2014, 279).

⁹ The same feedback anomaly explains the disheartening fact that even if the most powerful protagonists of the free market regime had admitted to a fundamental breakdown, this could not substantively reshape the field of economics and break the walls of the intellectual silos into which its experts and actors had barricaded themselves in the previous decades. Following the self-justifying dynamics of complicit competition, dominant and dissenting beliefs could equally gather enough evidence to support their position and to evade serious readjustment in reaction to an external crisis. In this “competition between unfriendly neighbors,” actors typically react to the crisis by blowing their horn ever more forcefully, instead of readjusting their views. Arguably, the best sign of a community being trapped in a “bubble” of collective mythmaking is that it reacts to crisis by amplifying (reasserting, reinventing) its preestablished hegemonic voices as well as its preestablished oppositional voices, without varying from the preestablished logic of their antagonism.

Cross-dependence in hegemonic and oppositional views in the collective belief system explains a disturbing phenomenon that has equally concerned Mirowski (2013a) and Bryan et al. (2012), who have expressed the view that the 2008 crisis has not triggered real renewal (let alone the dethroning of the so far dominant free market paradigm or ideology). On the contrary, 2008 has merely fueled further antagonism and amplified the long-standing debates between long-established scholarly positions for or against the free market:

SELF-PURIFYING TENDENCIES IN COLLECTIVE SENSE MAKING

By self-purification, I refer to the filtering process in which the logic of collective knowledge production leads to the—spontaneous or intentional—exclusion of “impure,” other-minded actors, similar to the way academia excludes renegade artists or scholars who do not comply with the rules. Donald MacKenzie (2011) has documented with interviews that competing investment banks and credit-rating agencies that in principle should have been placed at distant corners of the market have in fact entered a speculative, imitative collective game and sidelined all those investors who did not share the new conventions of the game and held different views about the value of the assets circulated in the game. MacKenzie has convincingly demonstrated how the circular, speculative process in which competing-cooperating actors developed common conventions of risk assessment at emerging derivative markets has gradually removed from the process a key group of conventional actors: those risk-sensitive investors, or “gatekeepers,” who specialized in relatively high-yield and high-risk investments—and who, by constantly comparing risks, yields and “fundamental” processes, would have secured the presence of reality feedback that is essential for the healthy functioning of the market.¹⁰

The complicit antagonism is certainly a key reason behind the fact that economists have been unable to distill from the shock of the market crunch some commonly accepted solid views about what to do with the crashed free market “bubble” and how to avoid inflating new ones. This is arguably a new phenomenon. The world economic crisis today differs from the great crisis in the 1930s, when the common trauma of depression resulted in the New Deal and the setting of the common standards of welfare state policy and financial market regulation for four consecutive decades. Today, the overall crisis of feedback (or responsivity) seems to block a similar sense of collective commencement to sprout from the astonishment of economic breakdown.

¹⁰ The problem unraveled by MacKenzie emerged in the historic moment around 2000, when banks—after a decades-long practice of packing together their assets (mortgages, corporate loans, bonds) into securities that could be sold to investors—started to further securitize securities themselves, which means to repackage existing securities into new derivative instruments. The (“liquid”) opportunity of freely repackaging old instruments into new ones has opened a wide space to maneuver for riskless profit

As in the case of self-justification, the problem is not that participants of the collective game are not interested in reality check at all: the problem is that they seek feedback that sounds immediately meaningful in the collective game. This self-purifying mechanism of collective speculation eliminates alternative approaches to social reality and truncates collective knowledge.

SELF-DESTRUCTIVE TENDENCIES IN COLLECTIVE SENSE MAKING

This leads to the fourth key recognition in the “collectivist” criticism of the free market belief system. Accordingly, collective speculation around the free market is not only self-propelled and blind to reality feedback, but also self-destructive. This self-destructive potential has been grasped by MacKenzie with the concept of “counterperformativity,” which refers to the fact that financial market actors, by com-

(arbitrage). This is because the issuers of securities have recognized that most investors tend to base their buying uniquely on the evaluation of these instruments by credit-rating agencies. This means that most investors have looked for highly ranked, safe products, and in return for safety, accommodated themselves with relatively lower yields. This has created an opportunity for issuers to buy highly profitable but riskier securities at the market, to combine them with other securities, and to sell the repackaged new product as a seemingly super-secure instrument with lower yields.

Key to this arbitrage maneuver, of course, has been to make sure that the repackaged instruments would fall into “super-secure” investment categories. Issuers could achieve this by closely monitoring the risk-assessment routines of credit-rating agencies, who dealt with a wide variety of packaged and repackaged instruments, and inevitably developed some simple routine conventions to assess their risks. Issuers could exploit these routines by monitoring what sorts of instruments have been assessed as safe by agencies, and by similarly composing their new instruments in preparation. Thus, the composition of new instruments introduced to the market was always designed, MacKenzie argues, according to the bank’s anticipation of how they “would be evaluated by the rating agencies, in a clear manifestation of what Espeland and Sauder (2007) call “reactivity”: the effects of evaluation or ranking on what is being evaluated and ranked” (MacKenzie 2011, 1786). In the circular, imitative game for arbitrage by cooperating and competing actors, “the gatekeeper role of the traditional buyers . . . vanished entirely. To the extent that the removal of . . . gatekeepers facilitated the loosening of standards of mortgage lending, ABS CDOs [asset-based securities repackaged into collateral debt obligations] contributed to their own downfall” (2011, 1822).

monly following conventional textbook models and applying them to newly emerging complex situations, may create new chaotic conditions which betray these models and actors who follow them. Standard economic models are “counterperformative” inasmuch as they guide actors into creating new realities which contradict their own predictions.

The same intuition of collective self-destruction informs George Soros’s recursive model of market reflexivity which explains how reflexive market action—in sharp opposition to what mainstream theories of reflexive modernity would predict—aggravates the biases of collective intelligence. The reflexivity theory of Soros, at its most innovative core,¹¹ identifies the self-destruction implied in recursive reflexivity in those moments when the equilibrium models designed for “normal” markets are applied in turbulent moments to abnormal, “far-from equilibrium” situations. In such contexts, orthodox textbook models are not valid and applying them is a self-destructing strategy. The very same argument has been made in a 2011 article by Donald MacKenzie in relation to the risk-assessment strategies of credit-rating agencies before the crisis.¹² These collective failures represent for Soros (2009) the “radical fallibility” of reflexive market actors.

3.2. Collective Myths, Beyond the Constructionist Mainstreams

In liquid modernity, the processes of marketization and mediatization are driven by speculative collective representations that may be incongruent with the “fundamental” reality of the new liquid systems they create. In these deeply paradoxical conditions, where actors may

¹¹ This innovative conceptualization of reflexivity as a radically fallible process is, unfortunately, too often understressed in Soros’s work, which in fact may best be read as a compound of two divergent theories of reflexivity.

¹² MacKenzie makes a similar claim in his analysis of how the conventions of risk assessment could be abused for arbitrage maneuvers: “the evaluation of ABS CDOs [newly repackaged financial instruments] using existing corporate CDO [old types of securities] models and similar correlation values is plausibly interpretable as organizational routine: the extension to a new domain of evaluation practices that were familiar and convenient, and that did not involve the considerable development effort that analyzing ABS CDOs in . . . alternative ways . . . would have needed” (MacKenzie 2011).

collectively misunderstand the system they operate, the long-discredited distinction between “reality” and “representation” comes to the fore again. This goes against the last decades’ social constructionist common sense assuming that the logic of a system can be read out of the imagined logic that its actors commonly and intersubjectively attribute to it.

In standard research, media interpretation has been thought to correspond to the media system, as it has been expressed in the frequent claims that mediatized politics does “work” and experts play a key role in making it work, that in the realm of mediatized politics, “strategy is king and whatever it is that ‘works’ is done” (Entman and Bennett 2001, 285). Mainstream approaches have all shared the view that the strategic rationality of key actors delineates the upper rationality of the system itself, or, to put it in the other way, the systemic logic of popular media-driven social control can be read out of the effective strategies of the system’s key operators.

The alternative idea that systemic reality lies “behind the backs” of sensemaking actors has for long been denounced as an obsolete remnant of positivism or functionalism. (Rothenbuhler 1998, 125) The idea that academia could define on its own the logic of a social system, independently of the perceptions of the system’s key actors, has been discredited as an elitist ivory tower model of research that does not fit the “popular” age in which we live. In such a “constructionist” epistemic atmosphere, scholars have had to accustom their own accounts on how a system works with those of its actors. In the standard view, the emerging system of popular media-driven social control can only be theorized in harmony with its agents’ accounts on the system, for these accounts shape their strategies of control which are constitutive to the system itself.

The tendency to build bridges between academic and industrial accounts (that I have shortly analyzed in Chapter 2) has been, often latently and implicitly, informed by the social constructionist claim that actors’ cultural representations are constitutive to social reality. Even those researchers who would never define themselves as social constructionist could not resist the pull of this theory. Since the glorious constructionist “turn” in social science eradicated the positivist distinction between (objective, external) reality and its (right or wrong) representation, it has become commonsensical that actors’ interpre-

tations are somewhat constitutive to the binding social systems they make sense of, and the two stand in a dynamic relationship. The constructionist turn in culturally informed research has replaced the idea of objective reality with that of intersubjectively established conventions that define for social actors what counts to be “objective” social reality. It is in this—often latent—constructionist spirit that scholarly research has tried to distill the essence of popular media and mediatized politics from the strategies and interpretations and knowledge of its key actors.

Seen from the standard viewpoint, my claim that the mediatization of politics has not been driven by the “objective” systemic logic of late modern popular media but by its collective “neopopular” (mis)representations could easily be objected for neglecting that it is exactly the understandings and strategies of a system’s actors that shape the system’s very logic. Accordingly, mainstream scholars might counterargue, what is the sense of talking about some hidden, “primary level” systemic processes taking place “behind the backs” of actors and experts, when these actors seem to get along well with the understandings and strategies they apply?

Indeed, if spin doctors are “packaging” politics to well-consumable “snippets” (Franklin 2004), and their clients commonly see these strategies work efficiently, on what grounds could a scholar debunk these strategies as mythical and inefficient? If political marketers commonly work to gratify the demands of the citizen-consumer with media-tailored campaigns and policies, do not they intersubjectively elaborate and establish a popular “media logic” that defines the relationship between politics and voters in terms of spectacle and audience? If the PR industry—from the high-profile PR corporate to the self-made PR agent of a civil movement—thinks in common terms about how to achieve visibility, how to set the “agenda,” how to control the “news cycle” or trigger “momentum,” if no one acts in the name of alternative rules, what is the point in arguing that the play is not fixed and its rules have been misconceived? And, on top of all that, have not too many of these strategies proved successful to call them inadequate? Who could not evoke—even visualize—dozens of examples of powerful, popular, media-friendly performances, like Bill Clinton’s infamous “It’s the economy, stupid” campaign slogan, or the live footage of Greenpeace boats forcing immense corporate tankers to retreat? Do not these media-tailored performances clearly prove, by their undeniable appeal, that the systemic

“imperatives” of popular media—partly imagined, partly discovered by their actors and interpreters—do, in fact, really work?¹³

To start with, what does “really” work and resonate with the people is just as unanswerable a question in the liquid, speculative environment of mediatized politics as it is impossible to objectively assess “fundamental” market value in the realm of liquidized finance. Similarly to the collective conventions of valuation and risk assessment in finance (Orléan 2014; MacKenzie 2011), modernist collective beliefs on popular media and audiences can never be falsified with cases that contradict them. Of course, mainstream scholarly and industrial discourses have plenty of references to cases where a popularized or mediatized strategy did not work. Industrial protagonists have tried to avoid such points of resistance, while academic critics have praised them as frictions that can derail the machinery of media spectacle. But behind all this, the real point is that the instances when neopopular strategies failed have never been taken as proof of their inner faultiness, their blind and self-destabilizing tendencies. The mythical integrity of the neopopular discourse has to be preserved at any price.¹⁴

¹³ To put it yet another way, as a cogent critique of a draft of this book once did (thanks to Melinda Kovai for this nice formulation): when we look at a screen, how would it be possible to distinguish what belongs to the screen “itself” (that is, the technological-economic apparatus of media that sets “objective” constraints on actors) and what belongs to actors’ mental pictures about how they need to behave on the screen (imagined rules of conduct that are produced by the neopopular discourse)? Media, after all, is made up of the actual screen with actual actors that we look at, a complex “regime” that consists of systemic constraints and actors’ reflections on these constraints—so how can they be divided into a primary, systemic level and a secondary, interpretive level that work independently?

¹⁴ Due to the self-justifying, unfalsifiable logic of mainstream accounts, instances of failure are domesticated to collective beliefs, typically with the argument that they failed because they were not popularized and mediatized (well) enough. (See, for a typical example, Bruce Newman’s books on political marketing, e.g., *The Marketing of the President* [1994].) Just like in the neoliberal defense of the free market model, where the model’s failure is always explained with its inconsistent or unsatisfactory application that could be cured with further and more elaborate marketization, the neopopular discourse also explains failure by arguing that in such cases, the strategies of popular media-based control are ineffectively played out or effectively resisted or neutralized by competitors.

Since no bulletproof evidence exists that could effectively refute an unfalsifiable discourse, the ultimate question, upon which our whole case depends, is a theoretical one. The question is whether or not the operational logic of today's mediatized social systems, like politics, can be held equivalent with the imagined logic that its actors commonly and intersubjectively attribute to them. My ultimate conviction is that it cannot and should not. This social constructionist common sense cannot be taken for granted in an age when the liquidization of structures has induced a very boom of collective speculation that is all about recycling and imitating and expanding overhyped beliefs in a collective sensemaking process.

In a liquidized context, where—as André Orléan has convincingly demonstrated in the case of financial markets—it is more rational to follow collective judgment on “fundamentals” than to assess them individually, the nature of intersubjective world “construction” deeply transforms. In a liquid context, intersubjective sensemaking risks resembling more the echoing of collective hype than the free traffic of genuine, local individual experience. In a liquidized, speculative context, the intersubjective fabrication of collective intelligence does not allow for the dialogical reshaping of collective belief in light of individually acquired information; on the contrary, the integrity of overhyped beliefs will be preserved at any price, and the gap between collective representations and reality will be dissimulated.

Let us return here for a moment to finance, to an illustration that shows the conventional understanding of intersubjective world construction has been a powerful trope that informed many of today's “neomodern” new age utopias. The (in)famous “efficient markets hypothesis” of the Chicago economists may be read as a prime embodiment of the late capitalist imagery that has depicted markets and economies as being “intersubjectively constructed” by a multitude of social actors rather than being planned by state administrators. The efficient market hypothesis claims that the collective intelligence of financial markets is always superior to that of any individual investor, due to the capacity of the market to gather all dispersed information that actors individually hold on real economy and to represent all this unintelligibly complex information in the simple and abstract form of asset prices. Seen from this view, market price is a genuinely, intersubjectively constructed social fact, and not a matter of hypes and

bubbles—which do not even exist in the Chicago worldview, as one of the model’s inventors clearly stated in an interview (Cassidy 2010). The speculative “bubbles” of popular media interpretation have arguably been dissimulated in the same way by neopopular mythmakers.

Collective, intersubjective portrayals of the popular media system are to be treated with deep suspicion because it is impossible to falsify them in today’s liquid, postbureaucratic context. The delusive logic of collective mythmaking allows popular media interpreters to evade any direct examination regarding the “goodness of the fit” between their self-justifying interpretive narratives and the actual circuits of media uses and campaign effects in the realms of popular media and politics. However erroneous their sensemaking narratives may be, popular media experts can easily rationalize them—being well aware of their privilege of having, come what may, the truth on their side. This anomaly characterizes equally the work of industrial experts (who can easily explain away their failures due to their higher competence, as argued in Chapter 2), and that of academic critics (who never give up in light of incoming new data shaking their tribal stance on whether we are manipulated by media or we are active audiences, etc.).

Our taken-for-granted constructionist vocabularies have obscured the concept of a social reality that does exist “behind the backs” of its sensemaking actors, “behind” the intersubjectively justified understandings and strategies that actors rely upon in their attempts to control the social world. This constructionist status quo (which is too much embedded in the decades-long, “pre-2008” imagery of late capitalist modernity) can hardly be maintained in light of the collective speculative processes unleashed by the mediatization of late modern politics and society. This challenge urges us to turn away from the social constructionist interest in how a new, media-driven social and political reality is created through the newly emerging understandings and strategies of sensemaking actors, toward a fresh understanding of how the complexity of emerging reality is “outshouted” by the mythical representations that drive the actors who create and interpret this reality.

Scholarly critics and sympathizers of popular media-based society and politics have focused on how its protagonists (reflexive agents, ideologues, or inventors) construct a new “mediatized” reality that eradicates everything incompatible with its systemic imperatives.

However, the growing autonomy of neopopular speculation faces us with a different challenge, namely that those realms of social-political reality where these “mediatized” rules are dysfunctional are systematically silenced by the noise of collectively blown hypes over popular media. The main challenge that the autonomy of collective mythmaking faces us with, thus, is not that social-political reality would be “colonized” and all its forms that defy the rules of popular media would be sidelined and not be allowed to *exist*. The problem is that, in the mythically framed space where the “new rules” of mediatized “popular control” are conceptualized, those existing forms of reality which defy the neopopular rules are not allowed to *matter*.¹⁵

3.3. The Neopopular Code of Mythmaking: Scholarly Complicity and Beyond

As economists can be reasonably objected to inflate the free market bubble, the academic study of “the popular” (media, culture, communication, politics) can also be blamed for taking part in the popular media bubble. Mainstream scholarly approaches have neglected the structural flaws of neopopular media interpretation because they failed to acknowledge the collective conventions driving it. Instead of fully recognizing the “fifth estate” as an autonomous interpretive “enclave” that cultivates a self-propelled collective discourse on popular media, standard scholarly theories have assumed that media interpretation harmonizes with the media system it interprets.

Presuming a harmony between media interpreters and the media system they depict is, however, as fundamental a mistake as it would be to claim that the reports of news media seamlessly suit the “objective” reality of the topic being reported upon. Of course, such a claim would totally oppose the heritage of previous scholarly generations that have always regarded news media (the “fourth estate”) with high degree of suspicion and systematically challenged its professional claims for “objectivity.” In sharp contrast to the scholarly tradition of systematically questioning news makers’ claims of objectivity, contemporary

¹⁵ I would like to thank Michal Kozlowski for this elegant formulation.

media research has never thoroughly challenged the very similar claims of professional media interpreters and the arbitrary, self-naturalizing conventions supporting such claims.

The scholarly neglect of the fifth estate as a discursive field with binding interpretive conventions is especially striking in light of the parallels between the “fifth estate” (the sphere of media interpretation) and the “fourth estate” (the sphere of news media). The rise of fifth estate evokes the historic process in which mass news media, the “fourth estate,” have emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a reaction to the growing complexity of modern society. A hundred years later, the fifth estate has emerged as a response to the growing complexity of media themselves which could not be trusted any more to fulfill their informing, complexity-reducing function. While in the mass media age of the twentieth century, news media had been regarded as simple institutions with a transparent operational logic, in the late modern era all the previous frontiers set by the above media logic (like the ones between news and entertainment, production and consumption, public and private, facts and opinions) have been dissolved in the emerging cacophonous, labyrinthine media universe. Beyond being simple “channels” reporting on society, media have saturated society and become integral part of the ever-complexifying society to be reported on—requiring constant interpretation themselves.¹⁶

¹⁶ Actors and observers have commonly felt that with the rise of new information technologies, media deregulation, the process of globalization, and the multiplication of media outlets has irrevocably undermined the informational role of mass media in social life. In the twentieth century, mass media have been relatively simple pyramidal institutions, with a clean-cut task of allocating information about the complex system of modern society, and spreading this information through countrywide distribution channels. The rules and practices and distortions of information allocation have been regarded as relatively simple—apparent for actors, and easily theorizable for academic media researchers. However, as the late modern age of “media plenty” (Ellis 2000) and “media torrent” (Gitlin 2001) has emerged, media themselves have become an overwhelmingly and perplexingly complex universe. Simplistic images of media as “gatekeepers” or “enlighteners” or “propaganda machines” have become untenable and media emerged as an opaque and profoundly ambiguous system in observers’ imagination.

The perplexity is all understandable. It is enough, for example, to evoke the figure of today’s politician to recognize that media today hardly serve

Both the fourth and the fifth “estates” have promised to efficiently allocate information about menacingly complex social systems. The way in which they have been crystallized into solid social spheres has been determined by the self-legitimizing efforts of their professional communities struggling for recognition and resources. The two spheres’ claims for recognition have been impersonated by their main emblematic figures: the professional journalist in the sphere of media, and the professional media expert (PR strategist, branding expert, marketing expert, consultant, pollster, and “pundit”) in the sphere of media interpretation. The two types of elite professionals have justified their status in highly similar ways: both have claimed to make “objective,” reliable accounts about the spheres they interpreted. Journalists, in the high modern era, claimed to provide their audiences with a direct, undistorted access to the objective systemic challenges and structural conflicts that affect their lives. In late modernity, experts of popular media and audiences have attempted to unravel the new rules of the emerging mediatized social landscape. Journalists and media interpreters have both positioned themselves as “transparent mediators” who are able to see through systems that lay observers would find bemusingly complex. The journalist has claimed to open a transparent “window to the world,” the media interpreter has promised to open a transparent “window to the media.”

While journalists’ traditional claims to objectively report about the outside world has met widespread scholarly resistance, the elite industrial branches of the fifth estate (marketers, consultants, pollsters, PR managers) could present themselves undisturbedly as faithful “heralds” of a new media age and its new systemic rules. Media scholars have uncritically acknowledged the professional credentials of these professionals because they have not been able to stand at a distance and look at the fifth estate from the outside. On the contrary, scholars themselves have claimed to hold an undistorted mirror to the popular media

as effective communication tools or information providers: on the contrary, they only increase the puzzling complexity of late modern society. Indeed, today’s politicians can hardly handle social problems without preemptively dealing with how this handling will appear in media, and even shaping their policy measures themselves in a way that presumably secures to them a positive media image.

world. Instead of critically rejecting marketers' and pollsters' efforts to deploy the alchemies of popularity, scholars have engaged in the same enterprise. They have entered the symbolic battle that fifth estate professionals fought for the authority of deploying/representing the systemic logic of popular media, the preferences of popular audiences, the power of popular communication. This involvement in collective speculation has clearly hampered scholars in developing a broader theoretical vision about popular media interpretation as a discursive sphere.

Grasping popular media interpretation as a discursive sphere would have required, above all, to recognize that media-interpretive practices are driven by a field-specific, arbitrary, and mandatory discursive code. It is exactly in the sense that previous scholarly generations have been able to theorize journalistic media production as a distinct sphere. Media scholars in the high modern era were well aware that journalists' self-projected professional image as "transparent mediators" has been grounded in the autonomous code of "objective news making" that has been maintained and sanctified by the media system. Scholars have rightly recognized the utmost importance of this professional code, the very ground from which ("high") journalism as a professional practice and identity has evolved. It is by addressing the professional code of verisimilar news making itself—either as a deceptive ideology (the Marxist way) or as a noble ideal that is too often polluted and needs more defense (the liberal way)—that scholars could critically engage with journalists' conventional claim that their news-making practices reliably mirror the outer world. Scholars could critically reject journalists' claims to reveal the objective, structural challenges and conflicts of society because they clearly understood the dominant professional codes of journalism and could explain why these codes do not, or cannot, guarantee the unbiased "revealing." In a word, scholarly awareness of journalism as a professional code has enabled the criticism of journalism as an ideological practice.¹⁷

¹⁷ Importantly, classical scholarly research could address the codes of "objective news making" because journalists themselves have been willing to reflect on them and openly publish them. Journalists' professional organizations, from the beginning, have explicitly formulated the rules of objective reporting in various "charters" and sanctioned deviations from them. Professional manifestos, like the Munich Charter that was accepted in

The scholarly failure to recognize the “fifth estate” in similar terms, as a distinct sphere shaping the collective interpretive work of all media observers with its naturalized, arbitrary sensemaking conventions and practices, reveals the drying out of scholarly critique and the complicit involvement of academic research in collective speculation. For the sake

Europe as a professional standard in 1971 (or its predecessor from 1918, called “Charte de 1918”), have served as self-evident starting points for the scholarly critique of the professional code, and practice, of journalism. The publication of such charters has allowed media scholars to directly challenge those very claims by which journalists have legitimated themselves in front of the mass public watching or reading their reports.

Much unlike those of news making, the professional codes driving media interpretation have never been made explicit. Media interpreters have claimed to “objectively” unravel the systemic logic of popular media, but have never underpinned this claim by explicating the professional rules of interpretation that in their view would make their gaze “objective.” Professional media interpreters could evade any debate about their interpretive practice due to the fact that they have worked much less apparently than journalists. The key players of the fifth estate have not targeted the mass audience in the first place: their core products (reports, data, communication strategies, articles) have circulated in the closed or semi-public circles of political and economic actors, media producers, and fellow media interpreters. The sphere of media interpretation has been, from the beginning, a “restricted field of symbolic production” (Bourdieu 1993), where actors target each other with their products and not a mass consumership. In such restricted markets (of which science and high art are the most typical examples), where the roles of producer and consumer coincide, actors do not have to legitimate themselves in front of the mass audience. They can follow, as Bourdieu demonstrates, much more subtle and informal self-justifying strategies.

This is exactly what has happened in the fifth estate. In their well-protected “enclave,” professional media interpreters could report on the alleged logic of popular media without having to submit to their constraints. The “products” of media-interpreting apparatuses (reports, analysis, campaign strategies) have been expected to unravel the alchemy of popular success, and not, obviously, to achieve popular success in any direct way. Indeed, the worth of these “products” can only be assessed by indirect evidence—the number of votes given to parties, or eventual changes in public actors’ popularity. However, this kind of feedback is too indirect; it depends on too many factors at the same time to directly indicate whether a given interpretive product has been adequate or not. Since the worth of their products could not be evaluated by any direct and apparent measure, media interpreters have had a lot of space to explain away even their worst mistakes and save themselves—and their self-sustaining, “restricted” field—from the dangers of rebuttal.

of a more efficient critique, a wider critical distance should be taken from other fifth estate actors. It is only from such an outside position that it is possible to critically reflect on the key discursive codes of collective speculation. However, this is not an easy task. Past generations of scholars could develop such an effective critique of journalistic discourse because they had not been journalists themselves and their academic ivory towers established a safely distant outer look. By contrast, today's scholars make part of the collective production of knowledge on popular media and mediatized society. Taking an outside position from which to criticize the discursive codes of knowledge production in the fifth estate seems not to be an option in today's academia.

Arguably, the more we accept the social constructionist common sense of social systems and interpreter-actors being enmeshed in circuits of mutual shaping (in which circuits the aspects of reflexivity, indoctrination, and performativity would all play their role), the less the lack of an "outside" position seems to be a problem. Like it or not, scholars might argue, media studies are tapped into the realities and discourses they analyze and it is better to come to terms with this. What possible "outside" access could anyone have, scholars might object, to the "real" and commonly misrecognized "fundamentals" of the media system?

In spite of these reasonable counterarguments, I still hold that it is inevitable to take at least a relatively outside position from which to unravel the discursive codes of the neopopular discourse, similarly to the way earlier scholarly generations have unraveled the codes of objective news making. But how is it possible to step outside, indeed—especially in light of my own previous argument that the neopopular discourse could crystallize itself into a rock-solid sensemaking structure in the context of overall liquidization due to the fact that it has made part of an inescapable interpretive tradition (of modernist theory) which has structured the collective consciousness of social and media analysts for centuries? If it was that easy to jump outside of it, the modernist discourse could certainly not have fed collective processes of neopopular speculation. Arguably, by positioning my analysis of modernist collective speculation outside the scope of modernism would immediately destroy the validity of my argument.

My own critical position is clearly not outside. Instead, my starting point is that the modernist interpretive tradition is much

richer than what has been used of it in the mainstream of “neopopular speculation.” The neopopular discourse, arguably, has severely narrowed down the scope of analysis and intellectual critique. The neopopular mainstream has established too few positions for critique, which have been taken by so many critics that they have become banal, predictable, and powerless.¹⁸ However, beyond the long-established critical arguments that actors in the neopopular discourse have never tired of reciting again and again, the margins of modernist social analysis offer rich alternative spaces for experimenting with new forms of critique.¹⁹

My analysis aims to proceed on the “creative margins” of the modernist discourse. My analysis, obviously, starts from the everyday notion of “speculative bubbles” departing from “market fundamentals,” which is clearly not a pure idea “unpolluted” by modernism (beyond the fact that it is itself an overhyped and as such, deeply dubious common trope). By theorizing the opposition of “bubbles” and “fundamentals,” I am inevitably drawn back to some modernist conceptual binaries that once had been standard tools of distinguishing reality from its understanding or power from knowledge, but have been marginalized in the past decades with the rise of a constructionist zeitgeist, when—as all attention has been focused on the invention of the new age and its new order—the frictions between interpretation and reality have been underplayed.

The opposition of bubbles and fundamentals evokes, in the first place, the key modernist distinction between “reality” and its (correct or incorrect) “representation.” The typically modernist concept of representation as a mirror of an external reality had been once dominant, however, it has been marginalized in the last few decades by social constructionist theories that have seen representations as constitutive bricks of reality (Hall 1997). Second, the self-enclosing

¹⁸ For a similar critique of standard leftist opposition that complicitly accepts the collective (neoliberal) rules of debate, see Mirowski (2013a).

¹⁹ There is nothing original in the idea that at the creative outskirts of hegemonic discourses, spaces may open up for initiating genuine renewal in their more central regions. But it is an old adage, as well, that if only a proof of total immunity, presented well in advance, would entitle one to criticize, this would make critique entirely impossible.

tendencies of speculative enclaves almost naturally find their theory in the once celebrated “Archeology” of the early Michel Foucault (2002), a model in which discourses are conceived of as self-maintaining spheres of knowledge production that proceed by their own logic independently of the power structures surrounding them. This clear distinction between structures of Power and structures of Knowledge has also been lost in the poststructuralist-constructionist upsurge that Foucault himself initiated in his middle and late career by turning to the circular creation of power/knowledge in his “genealogical” project. Foucault’s early model has been undoubtedly influenced by the classical modernist distinction between realism (focusing on the worldly realm of interests, money, and power battles) and idealism (the unearthly, unpolluted realm of pure ideas, free imagination, and artistic creation). Foucault’s archeological project aimed at showing that there is nothing idealist in assuming the autonomy of knowledge, since its production is shaped by discursive structures which are just as binding as the more apparent structures of power. The structuralist idea has been further developed by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (2003), whose “strong program of cultural sociology” is the third nonmainstream modernist approach to be summoned in this book’s attempt to theorize the gap between collective speculation and fundamental reality. The “strong program” asserts that cultural forms can reproduce themselves autonomously from power interests because they are legitimated by the unreflected conventions of sense making that members of a shared culture commonly follow (Alexander and Smith 2003).

It is by returning to the set of nonmainstream modernist oppositions (of reality versus representation, of power versus knowledge, of materialism versus idealism)²⁰ that I hope to grasp the collective

²⁰ By retailoring these relatively marginal modernist distinctions between representation/culture/discourse/ideas and reality/power/interests/status (distinctions that postmodern and constructionist theories have so successfully erased from the vocabulary of cultural research), I am certainly in a neo-orthodox modernist endeavor (see end of Conclusion), just as are those whom I criticize. It seems that I—like other analysts of late modern uncertainty—am doomed to neo-orthodox modernist speculation: the imitative retailoring of old theories so that they fit the emerging new world.

speculation mechanisms which have assumed a key importance in the context of general “liquidization” in late modernity. The marginalized modernist binary concepts will allow me to grasp the fifth estate, the enclave of collective speculation on the popular, as a self-propelled, autonomous machinery which produces collective representations that are claimed to correctly depict reality, but in fact silence the “fundamental” reality they recurrently refer to.

3.4. A “Strong Media Mythology”: Addressing Neopopular Mythmaking

“Strong media mythology” is the approach that I will use to critically unravel the collective conventions, or discursive codes, that drive the neopopular mythicization of popular media. “Media mythology” is the study of myths on popular media; the attached adjective refers to the prime focus given to the “strong,” sovereign, autonomous power of these myths to reproduce and expand themselves, due to their self-justifying symbolic power.

An important starting point for my “strong media mythology” is Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith’s “strong program of cultural sociology” (Alexander and Smith 2003) that applies to the field of culture, the “strong program” of science sociology developed by David Bloor (1976). The program is called “strong” because it attributes full sovereignty to cultural structures and practices and refuses to assume that they would somehow harmonize with the material structures of power, interest, money and status, as it has been assumed by mainstream, “weak” models of culture (like the mainstream theories of reflexivity, indoctrination, and performativity which have all assumed a certain harmony to prevail between media interpreters and the media system). The “strong” model is not generally superior, of course, to the more established “weak” models; the difference is that it attributes a “stronger” power to cultural forms and practices to maintain themselves independently of their surroundings.

At the very core of “strong” approaches, thus, lies the idea that culture is autonomous, that supra-individual and unreflected “cultural forms” and conventions have a sovereign symbolic force to frame actors’ meaning making and actions. Such an application of

Bloor's "strong program" to social life has evocatively been established by Alexander and Smith, arguing that in Bloor's approach "science is understood as a collective representation, a language game that reflects a prior pattern of sensemaking activity. In the context of the sociology of science, the concept of the strong program, in other words, suggests a radical uncoupling of cognitive content from natural determination" (Alexander and Smith 2003, 13). The thesis of "cultural autonomy" enacts the same uncoupling: it separates culture from material structures, knowledge from power—in sharp contrast to most mainstream theories that have tended to reconcile the two sides instead of addressing the gaps between them. Seen from the viewpoint of "strong programs," cultural forms and sensemaking conventions maintain their meaningfulness and authority on their own, and not because they are an integral part of more general constellations. Culture is a sovereign "structure as objective as any more material social fact" (*ibid.*, 24).

This "strong program" of knowledge and cultural sociology establishes a sound theoretical ground for addressing the "cultural autonomy" and the "counterperformativity" of the collective, speculative mythicization of popular media. The "cultural autonomy" of the fifth estate, as it is understood in the proposed "strong program" approach, could hardly be grasped with mainstream concepts of autonomy. If the fifth estate is a culturally autonomous "enclave," this does not mean at all that it would be an innocent island for free experimenting or spontaneous self-expression or genuine empowerment—these modernist tropes of "autonomous" action miss the point. The autonomy of the fifth estate means nothing more than its ability to sustain itself by its own self-absorbed, inner operational rules, independently of whether or not they coincide with objective, structural, "outer" conditions. In this view, the "culturally autonomous" practice of media interpretation is not any "freer" than other cultural practices: it follows the interpretive logic prescribed by the sensemaking structure of its collective discourse with the same fidelity as culturally heteronomous practices mirror the structural logic of their material environment (or "base"). The "strong" concept of cultural autonomy refers to the self-centered, arbitrary operation of reflexive practices which are submitted only to their own self-absorbed cultural logic, and nothing else beyond it.

A strong program approach is equally helpful to grasp the “counterperformative” tendencies of neopopular speculation. The proposed “strong media mythology” grasps neopopular mythmaking as a “loose cannon”: a self-propelled machinery that follows its preprogrammed epistemic and operational codes, whatever the consequences. Starting from the analogy of self-propelled robots, we may reveal the instabilities and frictions that “culturally autonomous” practices are actively producing in their outer environment. These instabilities have been addressed as the “structural imbalances of change” in Chapter 2. The robotlike machinery of neo-orthodox, modernist discourses is responsible for the lasting chaotic effects that they in parallel produce and dissimulate, being chronically unable to catch up with the world that they create. These encoded discrepancies of “social construction” have remained invisible for mainstream approaches that have allowed frictions between cultural practices and their surrounding environments to emerge only in moments of eventual failure, when the system-conform operation of the cultural machine wavers for some contextual reasons (Michel Callon’s term “misfires” perfectly embodies this understanding). By contrast, a “strong” approach is able to acknowledge those discrepancies that emerge directly from the operation of the cultural machine itself, from the arbitrary, blind, preprogrammed logic of “autonomous” cultural practices.

The basic difference between mainstream and “strong” understandings of cultural contingency has nicely been established in a passage where Alexander and Smith have opted for Foucault’s early “archaeological” approach in contrast to his much more popular “genealogy.” As they have argued:

Foucault’s major theoretical texts, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, provide important groundwork for a strong program with their assertion that *discourses operate in arbitrary ways to classify the world and shape knowledge formation*. His empirical applications of this theory also should be praised for assembling rich historical data in a way that approximates the reconstruction of a social text. So far so good. Unfortunately, there is another hand at work. The crux of the issue is Foucault’s genealogical method; his insistence that power and knowledge are fused in power/knowledge. The result is a reductionist line

of reasoning akin to functionalism . . . where discourses are homologous with institutions, flows of power, and technologies. *Contingency is specified at the level of "history," at the level of untheorizable collisions and ruptures, not at the level of the dispositif. There is little room for a synchronically arranged contingency that might encompass disjunctures between culture and institutions, between power and its symbolic or textual foundations, between texts and actors' interpretations of those texts.* This binding of discourse to social structure, in other words, leaves no room for understanding *how an autonomous cultural realm hinders or assists actors* in judgment, in critique, or in the provision of transcendental goals that texture social life. (Alexander and Smith 2003, 19; emphasis added)

The main aim of my "strong media mythology" will be to theorize the systematic "disjunctures" between the collective understanding of the new "popular media age" and the existing popular media environment that actually emerges along these collective beliefs. These disjunctures should not be seen as eventual, contextual ruptures, but as the direct products of the self-absorbed inner logic of collective speculation. This requires the unraveling of the tropes and practices that allow the neo-popular discourse to naturalize itself as the only plausible interpretive framework, to hide its inner limitations, and to veil the chaos it produces due to the dysfunctions it has effectively veiled.

3.5. Understanding Popular Media Myths: From a "Weak" to a "Strong" Model

Popular media today are heavily and increasingly mythicized social phenomena. All social actors who try to understand their potentials and dangers are haunted by a handful of media-related myths, and are exposed to hardly resistible symbolic pressures to further mythicize popular media. These pressures stem from the fact that popular media in the last three decades have lost their familiarity, their operational "logic" has ceased to be self-evident, and they have become a problem both for their actors and audiences. The more social actors have seen media as a menacingly complex system that has lost its reassuring familiarity, the more excessively media have been mythicized. This is

a “liquid” modern phenomenon:²¹ myths are born when the circle of familiarity is broken, the world becomes unsafe and calls for symbolic repair and maintenance.

A major treatise of popular media as an object and trigger of collective mythmaking is Nick Couldry’s *The Place of Media Power* (2000), which offers a media-mythological analysis that (although a “weak” one) is a direct antecedent of my work. Couldry’s key idea has been that the place of media power is not to be located solely in broadcasting infrastructure, advertising revenue, or news programs and personalities, for this power resides, above all, in our collectively shared mythical belief that media are powerful. Couldry’s key idea has been that “we,” media-using social actors—should we be ordinary spectators, media “pilgrims,” ritual participants, wannabe or established celebrities, or public actors—tend to cultivate a mythical image which depicts popular media as central symbolic sites, higher-than-life, quasi-sacred institutions, inevitable sources of the knowledge and orientation for people to find their way in the social space. The mythical “media frame,” Couldry has argued (2000, 52), naturalizes a “symbolic hierarchy” between an allegedly intense, powerful and inevitable media universe and the more lame and inconsequential practices that would take place in other social fields. Couldry’s mythology has been intended to “deconstruct” (2003, 44) the mythicizing processes that radiates an aura of greatness and power around popular media.

Couldry’s diagnosis directly applies to my analysis, since it is exactly the mythicizing process that has driven the mediatization of politics. Political actors, fifth estate experts, and journalists have established the same mythical hierarchy between popular media and politics. They have symbolically constructed popular media as “obligatory passing points” (Couldry 2000, 48) for public actors to “connect” and control citizens, as key infrastructures of “liquid

²¹ This “mythicization” is a typically late modern phenomenon, which differs from the trust that people and public actors have conventionally vested in media. In the broadcast era, public actors accepted the news-making routines of media as self-evident and appropriate, and audiences regarded them as a familiar, safe, and transparent environment (Silverstone 1994). Broadcast media were trusted and liked—they were hegemonic, but they were not, or they were less intensely, “mythicized.”

control” in politics. Meanwhile, actors and experts have also believed that the conventional practice or “logic” of politics (that of the integration of social classes into mass parties, but also the logic of responsible governance that seeks for the higher good by balancing out diverse interests with systemic constraints [see Meyer 2002]) is not symbolically powerful enough to “connect” audience-electorates and therefore needs to be reframed according to the media imperatives of popular connection. The reframing of politics, what we usually call its “mediatization,” has been based on the mythical understanding of popular media as a key “power center” with a prominent symbolic power to connect the audience.

Couldry’s research has revealed that social actors are subjected to intense pressures toward mythically aggrandizing popular media and seeing them as a superior power. Equally worthy of merit has been Couldry’s attempt to theorize the belief in media power as a myth, and not as an ideological consent. Attempting to step beyond a Marxist critique of ideology, Couldry has argued in a Foucauldian spirit that the myth of media popularity is not a clean-cut ideology produced and “superimposed” (2000, 5) by big media corporations. Instead, Couldry has proposed a broader understanding of media power as a mythical, intersubjective artifact, that is maintained in a circular process by all social actors. It is in these collective circuits where Couldry has aimed at locating the place of media power.

The media . . . have social effects on a large scale not only because centralised mechanisms of broadcasting are in place, but also because we believe in the authority of media discourse in countless local contexts, because we believe that most others believe the same, and because we act on the basis of these beliefs on countless specific occasions. These local patterns of belief and action have become so routine that, in practice, we run them together in a general conception of the media’s “effects” largely abstracted from those specific contexts of reproduction. (2000, 5)

This formulation could be directly used for my own book’s analysis on how collective speculation on popular media-driven “liquid control” has grown into an abstracted sensemaking sphere that produces knowledge independently from the local contexts where actors and audi-

ences, media and users actually interact (see the introduction to Part 3 below).

This truly innovative and radical argument was clearly ahead of its time. When it was born, late capitalist systems were at their peak, and the idea that they may harbor self-destructive collective delusions were simply not part of the zeitgeist. This may explain why Couldry's efforts have stopped at documenting the commonly maintained myths that media are prime and "obligatory passing points" of (top-down and bottom-up) popular control, without making the next essential step and showing how the same collective myths may fold into themselves and "betray" the media and political reality they refer to. Couldry's media mythology did clearly not go far enough to address what I have called the cultural autonomy and the counterperformativity of collective myths. With these basic limitations, Couldry could not deploy the radical potential of his media mythology, which has led him to surrender to those very same myths he promised to deconstruct.

The cultural autonomy of mythical artifacts has never been soundly established in Couldry's work, in spite of the declarations that mythmaking is a self-driven collective process. Following a scenario typical to most cultural research inspired by Foucauldian or poststructuralist theories, Couldry has implicitly reinstated the ideology-critical model in the very moment when he turned to empirical cases in which he saw the myth operating. These investigations have never referred to cases when actors' mythical understanding of media (as higher-than-ordinary, powerful, attractive, reliable, or relevant) would have resulted from a different source than those internalized categories that "the media" themselves have promoted in order to legitimate their privileged position in society.²² In the end, Couldry's mythical deconstruction did not fall far enough from a Marxist critique of ideology—which

²² In most of his empirical examples, the myth of media popularity is far from being commonly constructed by people and media institutions: the myth, instead, appears to be invented and propagated by the latter, representing the interests of the latter, maintaining the institutionalized status quo and downplaying alternatives. Once we approach Couldry's theoretical arguments about media power retrospectively, in light of the empirical evidence that he presents, it turns out that the "common" production of the media myth mostly refers to the widespread usage of internalized, media-promoted, media-conforming categories.

is understandable in light of the common imagery of the time, which focused on the power of late capitalist systems and not their inner discrepancies. The pre-2008 zeitgeist called for a critique of power and ideology and not for one of collective mythmaking. In his next book *Media Rituals*, Couldry has answered this call and openly reformulated his position into an ideology critique,²³ a “weak” model of culture as means of power.

The idea of counterperformativity is clearly missing from Couldry’s work, which is understandable since addressing it would have required the recognition of the cultural autonomy of collective mythmaking. Couldry’s “weak” model has not raised the possibility that media-related myths may incite chaotic processes which destabilize the media-driven society (or politics) that these myths envision. This does not mean, of course, that Couldry attributed a total indoctrinating power to media myths: on the contrary, he has highlighted audiences’ ever-present potential to contest and resist the mythical media frames that they have internalized.²⁴ As with many “weak theories,” Couldry’s has opened the door to those contextual, residual, nonsystematic contingencies that inevitably destabilize dominant cultural forms “from the outside.” However, this “weak media mythology” remains blind to the

²³ In the introduction to *Media Rituals* (2003), Couldry claimed his goal lay in “deconstructing one aspect of the ‘ideology of media power’ itself, that is the general ideology condensed within our ‘natural’ assumption that media are our access point to contemporary social reality” (12). And somewhat later: “[M]edia rituals are practices through which the arbitrariness of the limits around participation in the media sphere—that is, media institutions’ heavy concentration of symbolic power—is naturalized. Every media claim to speak ‘for us all’ naturalizes the fact that generally we do not speak for ourselves” (29).

²⁴ For both scenarios, internalization and resistance (e.g., Couldry 2000, ch. 7), Couldry has provided the reader with subtle and illuminating case studies. Couldry’s analysis fits into the mainstream of “weak” cultural theories that allow “dominant” cultural artifacts, while mediating and legitimating a hegemonic order, also open spaces for resistance and contestation. This is a typical strategy employed in the incorporation/resistance “paradigm” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) that forcefully dominated British cultural studies for two decades. The paradigm, with its sole focus on how dominant culture or ideology may be resisted or reappropriated by people, has missed the “strong” inner power of cultural forms and practices to produce chaos by themselves.

inner, precoded flaws of collective media myths that destabilize their environment due to the unreflected arbitrariness of their sensemaking conventions (the prime objects of “strong” approaches, as argued in the previous section).

Arguably, Couldry’s promising media mythology has led back to a “weak,” ideology-critical project due to the fact that it could not name any possible institutional source of mythicization that would be different from media institutions themselves. In 2000, it was not possible to recognize that collective mythmaking on media (and markets) tends to fold into self-propelled and self-justifying discursive “enclaves” or “bubbles.” By not taking into account that myths about popular media are produced in a self-maintaining discursive sphere, Couldry’s “weak” mythology has necessarily slid back into an ideology-critical vision in which, in the end, “the media” are seen to reinforce their symbolic power through circulating myths about their own “grandeur.” Such a position, however, is an impasse. Indeed, in the ideology-critical moments when Couldry attributes to media an overwhelming power to mythicize and legitimate themselves, he builds upon the very same myth of “media power” that he seeks to dismantle.

In contrast to a “weak” approach such as Couldry’s, I have proposed a “strong media mythology” approach to theoretically grasp how collective mythmaking in popular media works as a culturally autonomous and counterperformative machinery in late modern society. With the proposed approach I will be able to unravel how collective mythmaking folds into itself and follows its preprogrammed epistemic conventions, whatever the consequences.

The following critical analysis of the “neopopular bubble” will progress on the road paved by the above presented critique of collective beliefs on free markets. As I have shown, research of the free market belief system has advanced quite far in exploring how actors’ reliance on collective interpretive conventions may unleash self-enclosing tendencies. The research I have overviewed suggests that actors almost inevitably submit themselves to these tendencies by complying with a predefined set of collective conventions in making sense of free markets. Four processes of self-enclosurement have been discussed: self-propelling, self-justification, self-purification, and self-destruction. The first two processes of collective sense making can be connected to

the idea of “cultural autonomy,” while the two last processes refer to “counterperformative” mechanisms.

The next part of the book will explore the self-enclosing strategies that maintain the cultural autonomy of neopopular mythmaking. The neopopular discourse will be interpreted as a self-propelled machinery that is fueled by the inner dynamics of its precoded modernist oppositions (“popular” versus “non-popular” being its key generative binary code, in a similar way as the mythical opposition of state versus market frames the free market belief system). Along neo-modern, neopopular oppositions, as I will show, a “restricted” field of competition opens in which interpretive positions are each others’ accomplices as much as competitors (see chapter sections 4.1, 4.2). The fifth estate’s cultural autonomy stems also from the self-justifying power of its discourse. The commonly used modernist toolbox allows neopopular media experts to make their accounts unfalsifiable (see chapter sections 4.3, 4.4) and to bestow them with a mythical plausibility.

Part 3 will develop the hint that neopopular mythmaking is counterperformative. The self-purifying—and in consequence, self-truncating—tendency of the fifth estate has already been addressed previously in Chapter 2, when I have shown how the emergence of “speculative centers” above the bureaucratic big institutions has eliminated from decision making the institutions’ midlevel officers (party officers in politics, engineers in commodity production, channel executives in media, journalists in news production). This is very similar to MacKenzie’s case (2011), presented earlier, on how old-style investors specialized in high-risk, high-yield assets have been excluded from the emerging circuits of collective speculation on derivatives. In Part 3 I will mainly address the self-destructive tendencies of neopopular mythmaking. This “counterperformative” process will be addressed in my analysis of latent events, which will be grasped as unexpected and unruly consequences of the speculative race for popularity that destabilizes the mediatized political world envisioned by actors and experts.

Part 2.

*The Cultural Autonomy of
Neopopular Mythmaking*

Introduction to Part 2

The modernist discourse on the popular media age has provided its protagonists with a wide set of binary concepts by which they could separate “popular” media forms, communication strategies, and audience dispositions from “nonpopular” (elitist or noble or responsible or unsuccessful, etc.) ones. The binary taxonomic system of modernism has allowed neopopular mythmakers to develop sophisticated accounts on how popular media-based “liquid control” works, how popular resonances emerge from the interactions of actors and audiences, and how they are exploited for the sake of (either top-down or bottom-up) control. Modernist binaries have allowed actors to distinguish good and bad, suppressive and emancipating, successful and unsuccessful forms of media-based “liquid control.” With these distinctions, actors could separate the sacred from the profane, the meaningful from the meaningless, cosmos from chaos—and, thus, they could maintain their mythical vision that mediatized late modern society and politics form an intelligible, transparent, rule-governed, ordered universe. It is due to its order-creating ritual power that the modernist discourse could establish its sovereign authority in common consciousness. Indeed, the link between the ritual distinction of sacred from profane and the autonomy of cultural forms has been a central tenet in the strong program of cultural sociology and more generally in structuralist anthropology, where scholarly “focus on the binary opposition (has

been) a key tool for asserting the autonomy of cultural forms" (Alexander and Smith 2003, 23).¹

The modernist promise of "ordering" the world into a transparent and intelligible universe has exerted a nearly irresistible draw on actors in the age of "liquidization" when the high modern model of bureaucratic control has been gradually replaced by new and uncertain infrastructures of "liquid control." In politics, commodity production, news production, and media entertainment, the question of how to manage the elusive "people" has unbearably sharpened the eternal modernist dilemma of social control. As we will see in a moment, the question of "Who controls whom?" in modern society (how modern institutions control the modern individual and vice versa) has always represented a burning dilemma. However, this dilemma could be, if not resolved, at least appeased in the high modern era, when bureaucratic institutions integrated wide segments of the population into their pyramidal grip. As I have argued in Chapter 2, the relative "availability" of large-

¹ A paramount example of this sort of analysis has been Alexander and Smith's reconstruction of the discourse, or culture, of "American civil society," at the very heart of which in their view lies "a set of binary codes." Among these, central is a "'democratic code' that creates the discourse of liberty. It specifies the characteristics of actors, social relationships, and institutions that are appropriate in a democratically functioning society. Its antithesis is a 'counterdemocratic code' that specifies the same features for an authoritarian society. The presence of two such contrasting codes is no accident: the elements that create the discourse of liberty can signify democracy only by virtue of the presence of antonymic 'partners' in an accompanying discourse of repression" (Alexander and Smith 1993, 121).

As Alexander and Smith have highlighted, the sacred democratic values like autonomy, activity, responsibility, self-control, or rationality could be meaningful and attractive for Americans because they have represented a positive alternative to a set of counterconcepts (like other-dependence, passivity, selfishness, hysteria, eccentric behavior, and so on) that people saw as impure and dangerous. The example illustrates well why binarizing taxonomies are so vital to the ability of autonomous cultural forms to sustain themselves. The American civil society discourse could maintain itself by enacting a ritual, cosmic fight between Good and Evil, through the celebration of utopian values and the degradation and exclusion of their polluted counterpoles. It is exactly the binarizing dynamics that produces the emotional load of autonomous cultural forms, and provides them with a hardly resistible gravitational force, allowing them to cut off people from alternative taxonomies and distinctions.

scale populations has allowed elites to take a relaxed attitude that did not need a precise, documented, scientific, predictive understanding of how exactly the flows of “popular control” work. Although the ideas and practices of “popular connection making” have been present in the life of big institutions, they have been treated as (potentially useful) supplements to availability-based control. However, as this latter has been undermined, the discourse of popular connection/resonance has been lifted into the center and its protagonists have been expected to be able to describe how to manage people as elusive audiences-consumers in a postbureaucratic world.

As the institutional background of high modern bureaucratic control that so far had allowed the bracketing off the dilemma of popular control has faded, the irresolvable tensions of this dilemma has burst out in an ever-intensifying, ever-expanding process of collective mythmaking. How will it be possible to manage the “unmanageable customer”? Where can one find the “desperately sought” audience, the “unpredictable” audience? (see Gabriel and Lang 2006; Ang 1991; Napoli 2001). How to control the uncontrollable and elusive and ephemeral realm of “the popular”? To these questions, experts of the popular have responded by making their modernist models and strategies increasingly sophisticated and pumping them into a mythical universe where all the questions about media-based “liquid control” seemed to be answerable.

The process in which the irresolvable dilemmas of liquid “popular control” incite a collective endeavor of modernist, neopopular mythmaking corresponds closely to the structuralist anthropological understanding of myths, which, seen from a structuralist viewpoint,

represent a dreamlike working-over of a fundamental dilemma or contradiction within a culture which can be expressed in the form of a pair of oppositions. The development of the myth constitutes a repeated reframing of this tension through layers of paired opposites which are transformations of the primary pair. These layers begin with classifications based on physical perception and become increasingly more generalized. (Chandler 2007, 102)

These lines forecast not only the self-enclosed autonomy of neopopular mythmaking, but also its self-undermining, counterperformative

tendencies that make it similar to a self-propelled tumorous vegetation that is bound to fall because it blindly follows its precoded inner logic of self-reproduction. Indeed, it is with the expansive recombination of modernist binaries into newer and newer mythical “layers” (accounts, narratives, models) that neopopular mythmakers have hoped to resolve the impasses of the same modernist binary system.

The Modernist Discourse and the Dilemma of Control

The “modernist” discourse of social analysis has, since the beginning, harbored a normative dilemmatic thinking that has revolved around a set of eternal binary questions about control and agency in modern society. Are we, modern individuals, able to control ourselves or are we controlled by the institutions of modern society? Are we subjects of our fate or mere objects of others’ actions? In our life choices, are we free or do we confine ourselves to pre-given, imposed alternatives? These key generative questions and dilemmas, inherited from Enlightenment social philosophy, reveal that the modernist discourse articulates the problem of control in a binary taxonomic system that is focused on the (existing or lacking) sovereignty of the social actor as an agent of control. Accordingly, the modernist discourse of social analysis may well be defined as a binary-making intellectual enterprise that arranges the modern social world, its inner tensions and contradictions, with a closed set of privileged conceptual pairs that oppose the sovereign agency of the individual with the oppressive structures of modern society (Alexander 2003a; Bauman 1993; Berman 1982; Grossberg 1996; McGuigan 2006).

Media experts, just like most analysts of modern society, have been obsessed with the eternal question of “Who controls whom?” in modern society. Can media and political actors, media experts have asked countless times, persuade and mobilize their elusive audience, or does the audience select for themselves which message to pay attention to? Can media audiences take action on their own or do they accept and take the opportunities for action as framed by the media and politicians? Do audiences resist advertising campaigns or it is possible to run campaigns that are effective? These eternal, and arguably unanswerable, binary dilemmas constitute a general template that has not ceased to

frame intellectual speculation about mass media since their emergence. In the last century, media systems have changed immensely—however, the binary taxonomic system by which media experts have made sense of media has remained the same. The modernist discourse of media interpretation has survived all the structural transformations of media in the last century—from print to radio to television, from broadcasting to cable, from analog to digital—and it is exactly in this incredible resilience where we can find the “mythical” power of this discourse.

Here we have tapped on the very roots of the “speculative bubble” that occupies me in this book. If today’s media interpretation deviates from the “fundamental” realities of the media system, this is due to its mythical power to maintain its orthodox discursive structures, untouched by the systemic transformations of media. In the last few decades, media systems have changed—while our expert discourse about them has remained the same. Of course, journals in academia, advertising, and marketing are filled with many seemingly new concepts and theories, however, it is arguable that most of these are retailored versions of long existing modernist tropes about control and agency. In Chapters 4 and 5, I will present in detail the techniques by which the modernist discourse has transferred its established, “orthodox” concepts to newer and newer terrains—following its inner expansive, “bubblelike” logic.

Before addressing the expansive inner code of the modernist discourse, however, we have to unravel why modernist media interpretation has been so much more resilient than the forms of media that it has scrutinized. This is because, as I will demonstrate in the next chapters, its binarizing taxonomic system could serve as a reassuringly safe harbor for the always uncertain modernist analyst. What we need to understand in the first place, then, is the interpretive uncertainties that media experts have been inevitably exposed to.

The basic uncertainty of media research has resulted from a structural paradox, which is that in spite of the very centrality of the question of control in modern social and media systems, it is impossible to reassuringly define “Who controls whom?” Media interpreters have mostly been aware, instinctively or reflexively, of the fact that the place of control can rarely be satisfactorily established in modern media systems. In the normatively oriented field of academic research, the uncertainty manifested itself in the fact that even the most apparent

emanations of top-down “media power” could easily be argued to also express some “genuine” audience needs. At the same time, no audience activity could be seen as sovereign enough for it not to be blamed for being complicit with “the system.” Meanwhile, in the industrial branches of media interpretation, the same structural uncertainty has led experts to make contradictory claims. Marketing researchers, PR strategists, and consumer behavior analysts have asserted that media audiences are unprecedentedly active and escape strategic communication—but, of course, are never active enough to evade all techniques of strategic communication (especially those the expert wanted to sell to her clients). Political campaign experts have written guidebooks about the “road to victory” while also announcing that the rules of campaign success cannot be read out of books since voter reactions are too fluctuating to be predictably managed by some rules of thumb.

The uncertainty of control, of course, is not media-specific at all, but represents a deeper, “genuine contradiction at the heart of modernity” (Bauman 1993, 69). This inescapable contradiction lies in the fact that modern society aims to powerfully govern its members and it also expects its members to govern themselves; meanwhile, it makes impossible to distinguish these two forms of control. Indeed, in modern society, the power of the “government” (of the abstract modern institution) and the power of the sovereign individual or community are equally present—this coexistence has inspired Foucault’s famous dictum that modern “power is exercised only over free subjects” (Foucault 1983, 221). The inherently contradictory, unstable nature of modern social organization—the “dialectics of control,” in Giddens’s words (1986)²—has been a prime concern of modernist social thinking inside and outside the academy (see online Appendix 1).

The modernist discourse could reproduce itself so effectively because it offered a mythical solution to the structural paradox of control in modern society. By allowing to meaningfully assess “who is

² “Power within social systems that enjoy some continuity over time and space presumes regularised relations of autonomy and dependence between actors or collectivities in contexts of social interaction. But all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. This is what I call the dialectic of control in social systems” (Giddens 1986, 16).

in control,” the modernist discourse could effectively offer a mythical sense of agency and control to professional experts. Such a mythical reassurance, of course, has always been a much sought-after asset in modern society where so many actors shared the deranging experience that everything is in a constant flux, old structures are collapsing, and the future is uncertain (Berman 1982). However, as it has been widely observed, the sense of uncertainty has sharply intensified in late modern society. In the last three decades, actors and experts felt commonly to lose ground and, thus, made desperate efforts to understand the “new rules” of the “liquid” world that they saw coming with a post-bureaucratic late modernity.

The Modernist Discourse on “The Popular”

In the two following chapters, my main aim will be to explain why the fifth estate’s neo-orthodox, neopopular discourse has become such a successful, hegemonic “reflexive structure” that could enclose its followers in a self-absorbed bubble. I will show how the binarizing taxonomies of modernism could provide media interpreters with such an effective mythical support in their efforts to maintain their sense of interpretive control and agency in a menacingly uncertain environment. The key mythical promise of the modernist discourse has been to meaningfully unravel “Who controls whom?” in the complex web of media, politicians, and audiences. To do this, the modernist discourse has offered its followers a highly sophisticated binary taxonomic system that has been composed of dozens of key oppositions featuring antagonistic models of control (manipulative vs. reasoned, top-down vs. bottom-up, persuasion vs. selective perception, etc.). It is with the help of this taxonomic system that protagonists of the modernist discourse applied their mythical concepts of control and agency to the media system in which they lived.

In the sphere of media interpretation, the modernist myth of a controllable, manageable, understandable media system has been translated to three mythical tropes and three corresponding interpretive practices. These ever-present mythical tropes have suggested that media are popular (“media popularity”), that media form a rule-governed system (“media normality”), the inner complexity and con-

traditions of which can be adequately handled by the omniscient expert analyst (“media transparency”). Each mythical trope has been articulated through a corresponding interpretive practice (respectively, “focusing on popular connections,” “setting the rules of popular control,” “liquid binarizing”). In the following I will present these tropes and practices and indicate how each of them has leaned on the binary taxonomy of the modernist tradition.

1. The myth of media popularity and the mythmaking practice of “focusing on instances of popular connection”

The first key myth of modernist media analysis has been that of media “popularity.” This myth asserts the symbolic power of popular media: their larger-than-life aura, their often irresistible force, their attractiveness and felt authenticity. Accordingly, media today are “popular” since they are attractive and useful, are trusted and enjoyed, and are used for various purposes. Media are the prime site where popular audiences can be connected and where they connect themselves with the world.

The “popular” power of media has been thought to reveal itself the most apparently in those moments and instances where media users “connect themselves” to particular media instances (actors, events, programs) that they find “resonant” with their lives. To understand the “popularity” of media, experts have focused on the most apparent, most powerful instances when media and audiences connect. These cases of successful attachment or “connection” between popular media and audience have also been commonly thought of as prime instances of “liquid control”: instances that allow media to control audiences and audiences to control their own lives through media. Instances of “popular connection and control” have been grasped by concepts like attraction, enchantment, gratification, empowerment, engagement, persuasion, mobilization, or identification.

In most cases, these instances and concepts have been planted into binarizing narratives at two levels. First, “popular” instances have been explicitly or implicitly distinguished from their “unpopular” or “anti-popular” counterparts that would not significantly move media-using “people.” Second, popular instances have been regarded as the primary sites where the main contradictions of popular media and culture manifest themselves: where the potentials of bottom-up audience power and

top-down media power, audience selectivity and media effectiveness, liberation and subordination are parallelly unleashed.

2. The myth of media normality and the mythmaking practice of “setting the rules of popular control”

The second key modernist myth has assumed that popular connections or resonances between media and audience do not arise randomly, for popular media work by general systemic rules that foster these connections to be efficiently established. Accordingly, popular media form a rule-governed, “normal” system that imposes clean-cut, coherent, universal rules defining how popular audiences can be connected and controlled, and also how audiences can take control of their own media usage. These systemic rules or “logic” of media would prescribe media/political actors to forge connections as close as possible with people, to provide media-consuming audiences with “popular” performances that they can willingly connect with. In this view, the popular media system would urge the seamless, harmonious convergence of media languages and audience vocabularies, of media “supply” and audience “demand,” of industrially designed communication strategies and existing audience affinities. The resonant convergence, or “connection,” has been commonly thought of as essential both for media industries (aiming to control people by “connecting” them) and for popular audiences (aiming to control inflowing information by “connecting” the media that they like).

To understand the rules of the convergence has been regarded as the key to understand the rules of popular control, the laws that define “Who controls whom?” in the late modern media system. As an example, the imperative of “familiarity” might be evoked as an oft-mentioned rule of popular connection and control. Accordingly, popular media would impose mundane forms of communication, because popular audiences would pay attention to what they feel is directly relevant to “their own” life experience. Thus, it is through “familiar” media texts that people could take control of their lives and this is how they could be controlled by media and political actors. It is in such a binarizing spirit that media interpreters have sought to “set the rules of popular control.” This key interpretive practice has sustained the mythical idea that the media system forms a “normal,” rule-governed realm where general rules define how media and audiences “connect.”

3. The myth of media transparency and the mythmaking practice of "liquid binarizing"

The third key modernist myth holds that popular media form a transparent, accessible, intelligible universe that may harbor complex and contradictory processes; still, these inner contradictions can be appeased from the privileged viewpoint of the media analyst. According to this myth, popular media reality is complex and hybrid, and it eludes many of our rigid conceptions about the instances and rules of popular connection and control. However, the myth suggests, our inherited concepts can always be reshaped and recombined, so they will catch up with the slippery realities of media.

This myth is essential indeed, since the instances of popular connection and the rules of popular control have been very complex and mounted huge interpretive difficulties. To deal with these in a satisfying manner, modernist media interpreters have had to maximally refine their inherited taxonomic system. Modernist interpreters have constantly reshaped, recombined, and redefined their binary concepts, for they could piece them together into narratives that are coherent but also that encompass the ambiguities of popular connection and control. This sophisticated interpretive practice, which has been the very motor of modernist narrative building, will be called "liquid binarizing."

As suggested above, the issues of popular connection and popular control have been grasped with the binary taxonomic system of modernism. However, this has been a tricky endeavor from the beginning, given the fact that the "popular" can easily be connected to both antagonistic poles of most binary oppositions, that is, to both modalities of control that these oppositions represent. Indeed, if a media actor or event or text is "popular" and "connects" with the audience, it does antagonistic things at the same time: it mobilizes a loyal crowd of followers and it liberates genuine energies. Similarly, if a rule of popular control, like the rule of "familiarity," seems to work, it will equally enable powerful communicators to control the audience and audiences to control themselves and resist the powerful ones who try to control them. Reacting to the inner controversy of "popular connections," modernist researchers have surrounded their binarizing statements with a mythical cocoon of other, similar but more subtle, binaries that could take the edge off of the sharper binaries used in the analysis. In the

practice of modernist media analysis, binary concepts have been incessantly regrouped, reshaped, and recombined. These “liquid binarizing” practices have certainly been amplified in the last few decades. The binarizing practice of modernist sense making has become increasingly flexible, adaptive, cautious, and sensitive to hybridity and complexity. With the practice of “liquid binarizing,” media interpreters could maintain their mythical belief that the modernist discourse offers a sensitive and versatile framework, allowing the analyst to resolve the enigma of popular connection and control in any context without oversimplifying the complexities of the particular instance analyzed.

The system of modernist, “neopopular” media interpretation forms a mythical discourse because it addresses popular media by an unvarying set of clichéd concepts that emerge all the time and everywhere. This does not make “neopopular” media analysis uniform at all—on the contrary, what grants the modernist discourse a mythical power is exactly that it allows highly divergent arguments to evolve on the ground of the same few generative binaries. Since modernist binaries have been infinitely shapeable and combinable, most media researchers could easily create newer and newer narratives in the hope that this permanent renewal will allow them to catch up with the growing complexity of the media world. Creatively exploiting the high flexibility of their binaries, modernist interpreters have shared the mythical belief that the perceived complexity and ambiguity of media is manageable within the confines of their inherited taxonomic system.

This has been a mistake. A key point of this book is that today’s media environment has reached a level of complexity that is not seizeable any longer with the permanent recombination and refinement of modernist taxonomies. Today, it is illusory to expect that modernist interpretive narratives could catch up with media reality by flexibly reshaping themselves all the time. On the contrary, what this continuous reshaping seems to lead to is a speculative process in which newer and newer narratives appear and offer newer and newer combinations of the same core modernist binaries, so in the end, every new account is a modified imitation of its predecessors. This imitative, “restricted” logic of innovation has allowed experts to expand their “old” modernist discourse on all sorts of newly emerging media phenomena, instead of renewing their discourse so that it could catch up with transforming reality.

Chapter 4

Mythicizing Popular Media in Academia

The following analysis addresses collective mythmaking in the academic research on popular media and mediatized politics. The aim of my analysis is to establish a new ground on which the modernist academic mainstream can understand themselves “not only as science but also as an ideology in the sense made famous by Geertz,” as Jeffrey Alexander has proposed in his illuminating analysis of modernist scholarly narratives about “modernization” (Alexander 2003a, 197). Without such a self-scrutiny, modernist research of popular media and communication would be doomed to further reproducing the same neo-orthodox, neo-popular tropes that today so intimately link it to the marketing, polling, “spinning,” in a word, to the very practice of mediatized politics.

The following analysis is a “mythological deconstruction,” and not a review of the state of the art.¹ Literature reviews are widely available,

¹ The following “mythological deconstruction” will differ from the well-known state-of-the-art reviews about the research of mediated politics (Moog and Sluyter-Beltrao 2001; Norris 2000; Blumler and Kavanagh 1998; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Sparks 2000; Dahlgren 2001; Meyer 2002; Brants and Van Praag 2006; Lundby 2009; Kriesi 2013; Esser and Strömback 2014). These high-quality reviews have sensitively given space to multiple and conflicting scholarly accounts. However, one might object with reason that these reviews have overstressed the inner diversity of the scholarly field, at the expense of exploring what competing scholarly narratives have had in common. Most reviews have rashly suggested that the existing diversity of research allows for

and most of them offer a comprehensive picture about the concurring approaches and disputing arguments in the research of mediatized politics. These inner cleavages, however, will be of secondary importance to my “mythological” analysis, which will address modernist scholarly discourse as a coherent mythical whole. In the following, disputing modernist approaches will be grasped primarily as various emanations of a shared intellectual tradition that constantly rewrites itself.

To start with, I would like to return to my earlier observation that the modernist discourse is an ideal resource for “neo-orthodox” reappropriations, due to its amazing ability to reproduce its core concepts through its various renewals. In the last decades, the modernist study of media and communications went through three parallel waves of renewal, each of which mirrored key changes in the economic, technological, and social environment of academia. Each of these renewals has meant to bring a new scientific agenda that would better reflect the unfolding, new era of late modern media and society. These three—highly interrelated—waves of renewal might be called the “ethnographic turn,” the “popular turn,” and the “new media turn.” These three late (or post-) modern turns have mobilized huge energies; however, in all three cases, leading scholars have expressed their suspicion that they have just brought more of the same, and not something liberating and truly creative. These criticisms represent a scholarly awareness of what I have called the “neo-orthodoxy” of scholarly renewals—which, as I will argue, also raises the question why this awareness could never transform scholarly practice.

A most apparent example of the awareness is James Curran’s famous critique of the newly emerging field of media reception (audience) studies (Curran 2002). In the field of media and cultural studies in the 1980s, a new generation of scholars appeared with the claim that academics have to leave their ivory tower and engage more directly with

kaleidoscopic pictures to be drawn only, and that a more “closed” synthesizing interpretation would oversimplify not only a heterogeneous academic discourse, but also the world’s very complexity that scholarly diversity duly represents. It is this very last suggestion that I will challenge in my following “mythological” analysis, in which I will present modernist research as a (too) well-integrated discourse, that allows inner disputes but also imposes outer burdens that delimit the horizon of debates and that neither disputant can cross.

the lived experiences of actual people. The new generation, under the theoretical lead of David Morley (1992), turned to the sensemaking work of actual audiences—which certainly gave a fresh impetus to the thus-far abstract research on media in Britain. Arguably, this “ethnographic turn” has been one of the most creative moments in the history of media studies. However, as Curran has trenchantly observed, the seemingly innovative new current had a conservative, revisionist character. As he argued, the “new revisionism [of Morley and others] presented itself as original and innovative, as an emancipatory movement that was throwing off the shackles of tradition. This was misleading. Part of the new thinking was revivalist rather than revisionist, a reversion to previous received wisdoms rather than the reconnaissance of the new” (Curran 2002, 106). Even worse, Curran has argued, the backward-looking revision of critical textual media analysis has offered a mere “caricature of the history of communications research [and] erased a whole generation of researchers. It presented as innovation what was in reality a process of rediscovery” (116). Nothing could be more symptomatic to the modernist tendencies of “orthodox self-renewal” than this famous criticism pointing to the very conservatism of the freshly invented new research paradigm of the 1990s.

The second late modern “turn” in scholarly research announced the end of the highbrow (the elite, the rational, the noble, the civilized) and the emancipation of the popular in the realms of media, journalism, politics, and culture. Scholars have clashed in never-ending normative debates about the pros and cons of the new, popular era. However, the innovativeness of these new debates was quickly questioned. In a famous article, John Tulloch argued that these new debates were a mere episode in what he dubbed the “eternal recurrence of New Journalism.” Tulloch has convincingly argued that in the last two centuries, intellectuals and journalists repeatedly emphasized the menace of some newly emerging journalistic practices (populist and excessive) that would undermine the established rules of “old style” journalism (sober and responsible), which they found socially more beneficial and more comforting. At the same time, believers of new journalisms have tended to assert the old, rigid, obsolete journalistic model to serve the worldview of established power elites. According to Tulloch, this “form of polar opposition is a recurring theme in the discussion of the modern newspaper from its origins in the middle of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it is arguable that the current

talking point of tabloidization is merely the latest spin on a debate that goes back over a hundred years and is reinvented every generation” (Tulloch 2000, 133). If Tulloch is right and the same opposition has indeed been reproduced in every generation, this is possible only because media scholars (like other experts) have been professionally interested in interpreting all newly emerging media formats and genres and products in their commonly shared, binarizing discursive tradition.

The third wave of scholarly renewal has focused on digital new media and how they put an end to the old mass media system (characterized by broadcasting, top-down control, and information scarcity). It is in this field that the first scholarly innovators claimed most forcefully that everything had changed with the dawn of the new era. Perhaps this prophetic lure explains why it is this field where new research has been the most frequently criticized for its adherence to “old,” long-established taxonomies. Media researcher Toby Miller has expressed serious doubts about whether academic media studies could truly renew themselves in reaction to the systemic emergence of new media. Miller has warned that our decades-old, too-well-known scholarly “concerns with soap-opera audiences, or broadcast ownership and control, have been transferred to e-mail discussions and domain names,” and he concluded that in new media research, the “same discourse” has simply been transferred to a “different object” (2000, 2–3). Miller has not been alone with this suspicion. According to Lynn Spigel, the scholarly neo-orthodoxy mirrors the fact that academic research has not been immune to stereotyped thinking that, irrespective of the particularities of various media forms, results in bold statements like “video games will make kids violent, the Internet will give kids access to adult secrets, computers lead to a lack of physical exercise and ‘healthy’ outdoor fun—all claims that were, by the way, variously made about previous media forms” (2004, 12). All this strikes a chord with Sonia Livingstone’s observation that in new media research, “audiences may be implicitly construed as participants in and beneficiaries of a new democracy or as victims of a new and highly manipulable panopticon” (1999, 63)—again a conclusion that has been drawn about many previous media phenomena, underlying the suspicion that in media research, after all, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Livingstone 2006, 19).

These observations pointed to the inclination of researchers to expand their established concepts to newer and newer media objects,

instead of critically rethinking their “orthodox” conceptual framework in light of newly emerging media realities.² Transferring their concepts and narratives across research fields and scholarly generations,

² To illustrate the very seamlessness by which the same key notions have been tailored and retailored to practically any media phenomena, let us take the example of current research about how political parties and spin doctors are “planting” stories into media in order to win the “news cycle” (Gaber 2000; Logan 2000). What motivates these strategies, researchers have suggested, is parties’ obvious desire to control the media agenda and filter the available information based on which people will probably vote. The following passage, taken from Patrick J. Sellers’s revelatory book *Cycles of Spin* (2009), represents the argument above. As Sellers has argued, quoting Blumler and Kavanagh as well as Entman, “politicians share the goal of ‘dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle at the earliest possible time, and repeatedly reentering it, with stories and initiatives so that subsequent news coverage is set on [their own] terms’ (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 214). As a result, the content of coverage ‘is really the imprint of power—it registers the identity of the actors or interests that are competing to dominate the text’ (Entman 1993, 53)” (Sellers 2009). It is clear that the suggestion echoes back the paradigm dominant in factual media research in the 1970s and 1980s (for a review, see Katz 1980), according to which TV news can control people’s minds and loyalties by shaping the frames in which they perceive the world. However, this latter paradigm has not been without antecedent, which is Walter Lippmann’s news research from the heyday of the mass-circulated press. Lippmann, as is commonly known, was among the first to argue that news media gain their power from transparently framing people’s worldview (Lippmann 1946). The mythical concept of news media as a trusted, seemingly transparent “window to the world,” this key modernist metaphor of “strong media power” was first formulated about a century ago, and since then researchers have sustained this inherited concept through consecutive scholarly generations, media formats, and media systems. The “transparent window” idea, just like its counter-concepts (e.g., people recognizing this window as politically “framed”), have become sanctified tropes, that sustained in spite of the fact that, arguably, they have lost their adequacy to grasp factual media power.

As another example, let us consider how perfectly the following argument, originating in 1933, prefigures the objections of current critics of media commercialization (e.g., Postman 1986; Franklin 2004; Hart 1994; Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Many critics then and now have equally believed that commercial media expose people “to the competing exploitation of the cheapest emotional responses; films, newspapers, publicity in all its forms, commercially catered fiction—all offering satisfaction at its lowest level, and inculcate the choosing of the most immediate pleasures, got with the least effort” (Leavis-Thompson 1933, 3; quoted in Hartley 1999, 67).

replicating eternal and unending scholarly disputes, media researchers seem, indeed, to regularly “reinvent the wheel” (Curran 2002, 116).

All this explains why it is essential to apply a mythological approach to scholarly media and cultural studies themselves. The modernist scholarly discourse has to be grasped as a mythical practice because its key function lies in reconciling researchers to the ambivalent fact that their innovative acts of creating new theories or giving unprecedentedly sensitive and complex analysis end up in reinventing the same key generative concepts and narratives that relentlessly circulate across research fields and theories and generations. Although this circularity of research has caused deep anxieties inside the academic mainstream (as the excerpts taken from leading scholars make it clear), the mythical force of the modernist discourse has made researchers accept it as normal.

By grasping scholarly media studies as mythmaking, we may recognize why the paradoxical “reinvention of the wheel” has never been taken as a severe nuisance that would undermine the very grounds of academic media research. Most scholars, in fact, have never felt uncomfortable with recycling the same core concepts and dilemmas that they believed to be coarse but also inevitable, imperfect but also embodying the eternal questions of modern life. Scholars have found the binary concepts simplistic but at the same time illuminating, over-used and still attractive, and too often inadequate but also too precious to be thrown away. Modernist researchers have been attached to the concepts that they themselves found ambiguous—eternal and imperfect at the same time. It is exactly in this scholarly attachment where the mythical force of the modernist discourse reveals itself. Indeed, as Roland Barthes has taught us, what myths produce above all is the

Of course, the well-known arguments that defend popular media against such claims today have also had their own “classical” antecedents, like Helen Hughes’s analysis about the “human interest story” (1968). Since Hughes (or probably since well before her) researchers have re- and reasserted that popular entertainment serves to enable popular classes to meaningfully deal with their constrained lives. The mythical idea has been further developed by Stuart Hall and his followers in the 1980s, and it has been widely applied to recent media programming, as well as human interest TV magazines (Brookes 2000), “stylish” postmodern politicians (Pels 2003), political soaps (Van Zoonen 2005), and political talk shows (Jones 2005).

kind of devotion with an imperfect thought pattern: a belief that our familiar concepts, however imperfect or improbable they may appear, can meaningfully explain, after all, the outside world.³

Scholars have adhered to modernist taxonomies and followed “neo-orthodox” patterns of innovation (creating something new without leaving the safe confines of their orthodox discursive framework) because they have felt the modernist discourse offered the safest and most familiar toolkit to address the central and still ever-eluding question of “Who controls whom?” in the triangle of media, media-using communicators, and the audience. By consoling imperfect concepts with a highly complex world, by consoling a threateningly new world with already known concepts, the modernist discourse of media interpretation has offered mythical solutions to the fundamental contradictions of control in the late modern media system.

In the following, I will present in detail how media scholars have combined their binaries into rich mythical narratives that have promised to fully acknowledge the inner ambiguities and tensions of the media world and still draw sharp, universal, familiar diagnoses about “Who controls whom?” in this world at the very same time. The structure of the chapter is the following: first I will present the binary taxonomic system of modernism and how it produces narratives from the same set of core binaries (4.1). Then, I will present how these narratives maintain a shared mythical core knowledge on popular media, on the key instances of its “popularity” and on its main systemic rules (4.2). Next I will proceed with presenting how the binary concepts grasping the instances

³ Importantly, scholars have had a double professional interest in joining the mythmaking, which has not only been a source of easy and familiar explanations but also a safe source of symbolic capital. By continuing long-standing debates in renewed forms, scholars could effectively claim to take over the symbolic authority of their predecessors. Since these eternal debates have been commonly recognized for articulating the most important questions of their time, they legitimated the voice and status of their participants. Thus, in the mythical universe of modernist media research, even the most polemic accounts have built their authority on those accounts that they have critically debunked. The opposed sides of modernist polemics have mutually legitimated each other and sustained a commonly shared, “mythical” knowledge about popular media.

and rules of popularity have been flexibly recombined so that they could fit the complexity and ambiguity of media (4.3). The chapter will end by presenting how the production of overlapping reversed narratives and the permanent recombination of these narratives have triggered an aggressively expansive pattern of self-reproduction that has inflated the modernist discourse into a mythical “bubble” which is unable to critically reflect on its outer limits and imposes itself on everything (4.4).

4.1 Self-Propelled Binarizing

The question of “Who controls whom?,” which is indeed the key generative question of modernist mythmaking, has been articulated many times and in many forms in academic research. The first lines of Susan Eastman et al.’s article about TV programming (1995, 265) offer a particularly evocative formulation. The paper starts with a polite understatement, declaring that “[q]uestions about the passivity or activity of media audiences seem not yet to be entirely settled” (will they ever be?) and then it continues by suggesting that the yet unresolved question, “the fundamental issue regarding activity remains the ‘locus of control’ (Biocca 1988, 61), Jay Blumler’s classic question of whether audiences or industries ‘bend programs, articles, films, and songs to [their] own purposes’ (1979, 22)” (Eastman et al. 1995, 265).⁴

The myth-generating question about the locus of control has often been charged with a normative load. In such cases, scholars have debated whether popular media manipulate or emancipate the people.

⁴ Blumler’s binarizing question, indeed, can rightly be called “classic,” even paradigmatic, since it condenses into itself the very agenda of modernist scholarly discourse, which has been built around the eternal dilemma of “who is in control” in modern society. The mythical question has been addressed in various, but still similar, ways in modernist research. It is interesting to follow how similarly the dilemma of control has been conceptualized in theories of strong media power, in scholarly revolts against media power in the name of audience agency, and in counterrevolutions against the idealization of audience power. These three positions—“media power,” “audience power,” “illusory audience power”—have accompanied the century-old history of media studies, allowing the key generative question of “who controls whom” to emerge in various forms.

In other cases, the same generative question of control has been formulated in more neutral or pragmatic ways, as exemplified by positivist researchers' incessant speculations about what counts more: "what the media do to people," or "what people do with the media" (Halloran 1970). Whether openly normative or not, scholarly discussions about media and politics have been framed by the kinds of dilemmatic questions that have embodied the classical theoretical antagonisms of media studies ("strong" vs. "weak" media effects, "active" vs. "passive" audiences, "incorporation" vs. "resistance," "top-down" vs. "bottom-up" power, "effects" vs. "gratifications," and so on). These binaries themselves have embodied a set of even more general theoretical dilemmas (agency vs. structure, emancipation vs. subordination, subject vs. object, genuine vs. artificial, reason vs. emotion), emanating from the classical tradition of modern social theory and philosophy.

The key conceptual dilemmas of modernist social thinking have been translated into more particular binaries in media research (strong vs. weak media effects, active vs. passive audiences, effects vs. gratifications, incorporation vs. resistance, hard news vs. soft news, public vs. private, information vs. entertainment, citizen vs. consumer, old media vs. new media, public service media vs. commercial media, vertical media vs. horizontal media, propaganda vs. deliberation, elite vs. popular), which core binaries have fertilized binarizing hypotheses and research questions. Does the negative tone of today's TV news, modernist scholars have asked countless times, foster a healthy, politically enabling skepticism or an alienated, paralyzing, antipolitical cynicism? (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). Do the emotional tone and personalized agenda of soft news help people to "politicize" the key issues of "their own" lives (Brants 1998; Brookes 2000), or, on the contrary, do they disable real political mobilization by enclosing people among the narrow burdens of human interest issues? (Dahlgren 1995; Sparks 2000). Are consumers/citizens able to rationally discount the promotional messages that they are incessantly exposed to, or are they vulnerable to these messages? Are they alienated or empowered by campaign ads? (Goldstein and Freedman 2002). Does young people's absenteeism and disinterest in news represent an irrevocably antipolitical privatism, or are the young still political but in their own way, engaging in new forms of mediated mobilization? (Barnhurst 1998; Norris 2004). Scholars may have developed highly divergent positions

in these issues, however, they have also attached themselves to the key concepts and questions that they have believed to represent the fundamental dilemmas of the modern media system. This mythical belief and the key modernist oppositions themselves have been reproduced from generation to generation.

The normatively loaded binaries opposing media power and audience power, activity and passivity, emancipation and subordination, or authentic and fabricated experience have incited a highly polarized theory building, so that even the basic theories of the research field have been defined in oppositional, binary terms. Much in line with the basic cleavages of general media research (e.g., media effects research vs. U&G research), scholars have interpreted mediatized politics from two opposite angles: one debunking popular media as corrosive to democratic politics, and one believing in its emancipatory potential to further democratize the political system.⁵ Deciding which of the coexisting potentials prevails in a particular instance of “popular connection” has been a prime inclination of modernist speculations about media and politics.

The opposition, framed by the orthodox modernist distinction of high versus low culture, has been perceived as the prime cleavage structuring the research of mediatized politics. Accordingly, the major theoretical cleavage has been suggested to lie between:

⁵ The fundamental normative antagonism has urged scholars to cluster around a media-critical (Patterson 1993; Hart 1994; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Moog, Sluyter, and Beltrao 2001; Sparks 2000; Altheide and Snow 1979) and a media- (or market-) friendly pole (Scammell 1999; Lilleker and Lees-Marshment 2005; Corner and Pels 2003; Jones 2005; Van Zoonen 2005; Street 1997). In the eyes of critics, popular “media logic” has seemed to dictate the iron rules of “spin and spectacle” (Moog and Sluyter-Beltrao 2001, 30), pulling politics into the mud of popularity hunting, image management, populist propaganda, flattering sound bytes, sensationalism, and negativity. Defenders of popular media, by contrast, have invoked mediatized politics as potentially “enabling new forms of representation and a further democratization of society” (Corner and Pels 2003, 9). A third group of scholars have taken a more neutral position, which typically meant a balancing or oscillation between the two normative positions (Kepplinger 2002; Lundby 2009; Papathanassopoulos et al. 2007; Mancini and Swanson 1996; Dahlgren 2001; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999).

- “Media-optimistic” and “media-pessimistic” approaches (Schulz, Zeh, and Quiring 2005; Corner and Pels 2003, 16⁶)
- “Cultural democrats” and “cultural elitists” (Blumler 1998, 56)
- “Critical traditionalists” and “popular culturalists” (Brants 1998)
- “Critical modernist” and “critical postmodernist” perspectives (Peck 2000, 232)
- “Simplistic” and “deliberative” approaches (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 221)
- “Critics” and “defenders” of popular media (Sparks 2000)
- “Utopian critique” and “populist enthusiasm” (Gripsrud 2002, 286–87)
- “Elitism” and “populism” (Street 1997)

Importantly, the binaries are similar, but not synonymous. The fact that scholars have interpreted the basic cleavage of their research field with such a wide set of homologous binaries reveals two things at the same time: the inner riches of a highly variable discourse, the stakes of which are too complex to be interpreted from a singular angle, and the relative coherence of the discourse, the varieties of which are all addressing the very same mythical dilemma. The fact that the same commonly perceived core opposition has been expressed with such a varied set of binaries (which are semantically different but structurally homologous) manifests clearly the mythical nature of sense making in modernist media studies: this is, indeed, how the same “wheel” has been permanently “reinvented” in multiple forms.

Although built of sharp binaries, the modernist discourse has not been a rigid interpretive system: its constitutive binaries could be connected to each other in many forms, and these rearrangements significantly modified their meaning. In modernist media research, like in any other mythical discourse, the meaning of any binary has depended on its place, or “function” (Barthes 1972b), in the syntagmatic sequence of the other binaries to which it has been connected. This flexibility is due to the fact that the key modernist binaries have been homologous, but not entirely synonymous: they have all performed an act of polarization

⁶ See also Spigel (2004, 10); for the opposition of “cyberoptimists” and “cyberpessimists,” see Best and Wade (2007, 1–2), Hibberd (2003, 51).

and established a normative hierarchy between two poles; however, they have not fixed the exact meaning of this hierarchy in advance.

The variations evoke a key idea of structuralist semiotics, according to which the mythical coding of reality is based upon the systematic usage of a few core binaries that are permanently present but are regularly combined with more peripheral binaries into particular narratives. Modernist scholarly narratives may well be interpreted, then, as clusters of binaries being built from the same set of oppositions and differing mainly in their ways of combining them. In the modernist discourse of media interpretation, like in mythical discourses, narrative building usually proceeds by gathering binaries that are similar but not equivalent and articulating them into “binary chains” which, due to the diversity of their constituents, are rich in meaning. In this system, innovation means recombination: new narratives offer a new combination of binaries taken from the same common pool of conceptual oppositions.

Like other mythical systems that are capable “of generating at least ten conceivable positions out of a rudimentary binary opposition” (Jameson 1987, xiv), the modernist discourse is a highly flexible system that allows its followers to create new narratives by recombining old ones. The most common way to recombine binarized modernist narratives could be called “reversal”: it means to take a binary concept, to lift it out of the narrative sequence of binaries into which it has been conventionally embedded, to reverse the normative hierarchy that so far it has implied, and to reinterpret, in light of the reversal, the whole narrative which the reversed item has conventionally belonged to.

As an example of innovation through reversal, let us evoke Nancy Fraser and other feminist authors’ attack against Jürgen Habermas’s rationalist model of democracy. Habermas famously theorized the superiority of the “bourgeois public sphere” over the mass media system by arguing that in the former, debate is more horizontally organized, grants more access, brackets off status inequalities, and tends toward universalistic principles more efficiently than any mass mediated fora of “representative” communication (see Peters 1993). Habermas’s point has been that citizens may emancipate themselves by engaging in rational deliberation, rather than by simply backing a representative who would assert their “genuinely” felt experiences. Habermas’s narrative can well be modeled as a chain of the following interconnected binaries: “bourgeois public sphere” ($\leftrightarrow$ “mass/popular

media system”), rational debate ($\leftrightarrow$ expressive assertion), inclusion ($\leftrightarrow$ exclusion), deliberation ($\leftrightarrow$ representation), universalist ($\leftrightarrow$ particularist), emancipation ($\leftrightarrow$ submission), authentic ($\leftrightarrow$ artificial).

The feminist reversal of Habermas’s theory (noting that it has taken various and contradictory forms endorsing either mainstream or marginal popular media) has suggested that participation in the rational deliberation of the public sphere requires status-related skills, so it fosters more the representation of class power than true deliberation. By contrast, the expressive testimonies of “popular” actors in the popular/mass media sphere could genuinely and inclusively express the will of the subordinated and foster their participation in social dialogue. In this reverse narrative, the emancipatory potential of Habermas’s public sphere has been transferred to new, progressively “populist” or “popular” media institutions. The feminist reversal, thus, comes down to the following scheme: “mass/popular media system” ($\leftrightarrow$ “bourgeois public sphere”), expressive assertion ($\leftrightarrow$ rational debate), inclusion ($\leftrightarrow$ exclusion), deliberation ($\leftrightarrow$ representation), universalist ($\leftrightarrow$ particularist), emancipation ($\leftrightarrow$ submission), authentic ($\leftrightarrow$ artificial). Importantly, although the two narratives seem to be each others’ mutually exclusive reversals, they are built from the same elements and sought after very similar values (like inclusion, dialogue, emancipation). With this commonly accepted framework, they have restricted the scope of controversy: they have been competing accomplices rather than radical antagonists.

In the research of mediatized politics, the two key narratives (critics vs. sympathizers of popular media) have also to be regarded in the same terms, as complicit “co-opetitors” (see my argument in Chapter 3). They represent two ways of translating the key distinction of “subject” and “object,” this commonsensical, foundational binary of modernist thinking, to the field of media research. The two alternative translations could be born due to the very flexibility of the modernist intellectual tradition, which has defined the “object : subject” binary from multiple angles, e.g., from that of action and that of thinking (action and thinking themselves being the opposite poles of a key modernist binary). Seen from the (Romanticist) point of view of “action,” modernist thinkers have set a distinction between sovereign agents-subjects and passive beings who are objects of others’ action. Along this line of thought, a bundle of homologous binaries have been invented—subordination : emancipation, activity : passivity, elites : masses, top-

down : bottom-up, artificial : authentic, incorporation : resistance, and so on. On the other hand, the object : subject binary has been interpreted from an epistemological (Classicist) point of view equally. Accordingly, objective thinking, that would suit the inner laws of nature and society, has been contrasted to a subjective immersion into one's own inner world. This viewpoint has fertilized distinctions like reason : emotion, detached : hysterical, unbiased : biased, fact : fiction, science : gossip, and many others. On the whole, from the viewpoints of action and thinking, two incongruent conceptual clouds have grown out of the same background binary.⁷ In the space opened by the incongruences, the same basic distinction of object and subject has been actualized in different ways by various theorists.

It is on the ground of the set of core binaries (each translating the key generative binary of object : subject) that the critics and friends of popular media have articulated their objections and sympathies into partially antagonistic narratives. Critics have tended to take a rationalist standpoint and claim (taking up the century-old argument of Marx or Horkheimer and Adorno) that the popular "subject," due to her "subjective" worldview has no effective defense against being turned into the "object" of those controlling popular media production. Accordingly, the key to becoming true subjects of action would lie in an "objective" regard. To become truly and genuinely sovereign agent-subjects of their fate, the "people" would need to connect with media channels that offer substantive information and allow for rational access to objective social structures. By contrast, the well-known reversed argument of populist thinkers has been that the rationalist ideal of objectivity is particularistic, it feeds forms of agency which subordinate disabled others as their "objects," and, thus, the subordinate can only become "subjects" of their lives by engaging themselves with antiobjec-

⁷ Seen from the angle of action, the normative hierarchy between object and subject has been consensually established. Being a subject of action has generally been privileged to being an object of action. By contrast, as far as the angle of thinking is concerned, the poles of objective and subjective knowledge have been less consensually hierarchized: the field of science has engaged with the former, in high art we may find equal interest in both poles, high journalism has preferred the former, fictional media genres the latter, and so on.

tivist, “subjective” media programs that they have mastery over, that they can competently use as active “subjects.”⁸

On the whole, rationalist and populist narratives, however antagonistic they may seem at the surface, may well be read as supplementary actualizations of the same mythical code, playing with the homologous, but not synonymous, articulations (actor: dupe, objective: subjective) of the same basic binary (object: subject). This shared mythical “battle-ground” has allowed for actors to take various positions, however, it has also restricted the scope of controversy and innovation. (See online Appendix 2.)

4.2. The Shared Mythical Core: Instances and Rules of Popular Control

So far I have addressed the binary logic of modernist narrative building and presented how a few rudimentary binaries can be enriched and recombined into various competing narratives that are each others’ partial “reversals.” In the following I will show that the reversed narratives of the modernist discourse, below the apparent level of their antagonism, are heavily overlapping. The production of overlapping reversed narratives has ultimately driven the modernist research of mediated politics, the questions asked, and the answers provided. The conceptual overlap of seemingly antagonistic narratives signals that

⁸ The claim that reasoned political debate is democratic (reason [¬ emotion] : politics [¬ private] : debate [¬ testimony] : democratic [¬ exclusivist]) could be reversed at any moment in a single step (reason [¬ emotion] : politics [¬ private] : debate [¬ testimony] : exclusivist [¬ democratic]); the claim that consumer choices may represent genuine needs and pleasures (consumption [¬ production] : choice [¬ mandatory] : pleasure [¬ effort] : authentic [¬ artificial]) could immediately be blamed for sanctifying the manipulative powers of the culture industry (consumption [¬ production] : choice [¬ mandatory] : pleasure [¬ effort] : artificial [¬ authentic]).

The counternarratives emanating from the bracketed countervalues would read as: “[I]t is by respectfully listening to the emotional testimonies about each other’s private life experience that we can create real democracy”; “the only possible way to an authentic cultural experience is to make culture based on a deep understanding of ‘our own,’ deeply imprinted cultural repertoires, and not simply picking, however selectively, some ready-made products.”

behind their fierce normative debates, media scholars have shared a common mythical core knowledge about today's popular media and politics—no matter what stand they have taken in the key cleavage of their field and what terms they have used to define this cleavage (as a battle of critics and enthusiasts, rationalists and populists, enlightened reformists and revolutionaries, etc.). By unraveling the overlaps of antagonistic scholarly narratives, we can penetrate to the mythical core of the modernist research of popular media and politics.

In the field of media research, the basic distinction of object and subject has framed the ways in which the popular audiences and popular media forms have been conceived. The popular audiences of popular media have been generally defined as active “subjects” of their media usage. The sovereign agency of the popular media-using subject, however, has been defined in restricted terms, basically those of selectivity, elusiveness, and distrust. The popular media-using “subject” has been seen to be capable of effectively vindicating their own “subjective” affinities and preferences with the help of popular media. Popular “audiences-subjects” have been generally claimed to be responsive to “subjectivist” address, preferring familiarity over distance, emotionality over rationality, simplicity over abstraction, and genuine character over alienated, strategic politicking.

The two key scholarly narratives (and their countless recombinations) have shared their common diagnosis that the objectivist, elitist, rationalist media model of covering structural issues and addressing the enlightened and competent citizen is in decline, and the leading force of today's media is to be found in those subjective, popular, emotional media forms that focus on more personal issues, build on familiar experiences, foster emotional connections, use accessible language, and represent the genuine preferences of the selective, elusive, distrustful consumption of popular media. The common mythical core of the neopopular discourse has been equally shared by its antagonistic narratives that may have judged very differently the emerging “popular media age,” however, understood the basic characteristics of this age in identical terms.

Forecasting the argument of this section, Table 2.1 presents how the two key “overlapping reverse narratives” of the neopopular discourse have maintained mythical “collective representations” on media that they could take and judge according to their value preferences.

The shared mythical ground of the neopopular discourse has been to assume that the substance of “the popular” manifests itself in defi-

Table 2.1: *The Shared Mythical Ground of the Two Key Modernist Narratives*

	The shared mythical ground of media critics and friends	The narrative of popular media critics	The narrative of popular media friends
The popular media audience is the subject of her media usage. . .	. . . in sense of being: selective (vs. loyal) elusive (vs. anchored) distrustful (vs. trustful) self-driven (vs. authority driven)	. . . which freedom is illusory since it makes her: immobile duped by artifice/ propaganda/ consumerism enjoy effortless stasis stuck into the private sphere	. . . which freedom is real since it allows her to: be mobile mobilize her genuine energies enjoy pleasurable engagements be a member of a new public sphere
The popular media audience has a subjective worldview. . .	. . . that privileges what is: familiar (vs. unknown) emotional (vs. rational) simple (vs. complex) genuine (vs. calculated)	. . . which gives access only to what is: parochial private tribal driven by strong impulses superficial/easy	. . . which gives access to dispositions which are: universal public and communally oriented inclusive identity driven „lived” and thus well-grounded and thought-over
The popular media system has a populist (and not elitist) nature. . .	since it serves the selective/ elusive popular media using „subject”, since it uses “subjectivist” sense making narratives	and thus, it subordinates people because it is: paternalistic (vs. equal) dishonest (vs. giving real access to people) manipulative (vs. informative) authoritarian (vs. opportunist (vs. long-term thinking and educative) undemanding (vs. mobilizing real effort) low quality (vs. high quality)	and thus, it emancipates people because it is: human (vs. pompous, turgid) demotic (vs. elitist) energetic (vs. static) relevant (vs. irrelevant) stimulates debate (vs. asserts obligatory truths) enlightened (vs. oppressive) educative (vs. evaded) inclusive (vs. exclusivist) fosters resistance (vs. authoritarian)

nite media forms and audience affinities that harmoniously “resonate” or “connect” with each other. The main instances of this “popular connection” have been regarded as the prime objects of academic research. It is in these popular resonances or connections between media and audience that modernist researchers have tried to find the key to media-based “liquid control” and its main systemic rules. The systemic rules of popular media have been thought to work to ease the production and amplification and exploitation of the popular resonances. Scholarly preoccupation with the key instances of “popular connection” has established the myth that today’s media system is essentially “popular.” Meanwhile, the common interest in the rules of popular resonance making and popular control has maintained another core myth, namely that “popular” media form a “normal,” ordered, rule-governed universe. On the whole, unraveling “popular connections,” their most typical emanations and the systemic rules of their emergence, has been the prime driver of the scholarly mythicization of media as “popular” and as “normal.”

INSTANCES OF POPULAR CONNECTION

Modernist scholars have found the very essence of mediatized politics in those apparent, immediately visible instances when public actors and audiences “connect”—in opposition to those instances in which such a resonant connection does not happen and the power circuits of popularity do not flow.⁹ Indeed, the spirit of successful and appealing “popular con-

⁹ Practically any meaningful relationship between media and audiences can be seen as a resonant “connection.” Accordingly, a “connection” would be forged when people: develop their habit of which TV news to follow, tune their radio to a given channel, start watching a show recommended by a friend, exchange fan trivia on the Internet, share music online, forge parasocial relationships with fictional figures, engage themselves with any sort of “media voice” they feel to be theirs, respond to mediated “invitations” (online petitions or reality show “voting”) that they find attractive. A typical moment of connection emerges when the “scattered attention given to much of an episode of a soap opera . . . suddenly lurch[es] into a moment of emotional intensity or pathos” (Ellis 2000, 83), when the user’s self-awareness is temporarily replaced “with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character” (Cohen 2001, 251; quoted in Green et al. 2004, 318). Or, alternatively, when the user satisfies her “need to connect oneself, with others, to the world’s events” (Bourdon 2000, 551–52; quoted in Couldry 2003, 100), even in the rare form of taking action with the help of media (Couldry

nections” has been lurking behind the most widely recited examples of mediatized politics: the saxophone-playing, popular Bill Clinton reclaims the representation of middle-class America from Republicans; Tony Blair opens new horizons by rebranding Labour with the help of infamous spin doctors (Esser et al. 2001); Karl Rove orchestrates the Bush propaganda machine and gains popular support for the second Gulf war; Stephen Colbert and other liberal talk-show hosts mobilize anti-Bush sentiments; Berlusconi’s Forza Italia transforms the political arena to a virtual football stadium; Prime Minister Gyurcsány (to finish with a Hungarian example) invites President Vladimir Putin to dinner in his home, where both act out as celebrities and enjoy a huge public attention.

Scholarly discourse about today’s mediatized politics has incessantly revolved around emblematic instances of “popularity.” This interest in “popular connection” has lain behind the widespread scholarly references to successful campaigns (Obama’s localized and web-based campaign in 2010, Blair’s third reelection); emblematic figures knowing what people are responsive to (Berlusconi the Media Emperor or Alastair Campbell the Grey Cardinal); or game-changing catchwords (Reagan’s (in)famous “There you go again,” Clinton’s (in)famous “It’s the economy, stupid,” or more recently the “Colbert Nation,” to cite only a few American examples). These examples of “popular connection” have served as common points of reference, self-evident objects to study and debate. What connects these is their immediate catchiness, their power to attract lay eyes but also the scholar’s gaze, their self-evident status as symbols of mediatized politics working at its height. It is from such “popular” instances that professional media interpreters have hoped to deploy the very essence (meaning, effect, and function) of mediatized politics.

et al. 2007). Resonant attachments have often been seen as audience responses to the “connecting” strategies of media, political or civic actors, like branding strategies intended to “reconnect [politicians, like] Tony Blair to the electorate” (Scammell 2007, 182), or practices of political representation aimed “to unify and connect citizens” (Urbinati and Warren 2008, 395).

On the whole, the notion of “popular connection” represents all kinds of (imposed or genuine) correspondences that researchers have supposed to exist between: encoded and decoded message; media agendas and the salience maps of the audience; media texts and subcultural affinities; party appeals and voter engagements; tabloid news discourse and media consumption; investigative journalism and citizen interests; and so on.

In the modernist discourse, the shared interest in popular “connection” or “resonance” has preceded any normative disagreement regarding which actor, and with what consequences, can “exploit this resonance to her own purpose” (to paraphrase Blumler’s question). The modernist answers given to the dilemma have been apparently divergent—however, from my mythological perspective, these divergences appear less important than the common starting point: that public actors and audiences “connect,” and their heightened “resonances” are vitally important sites where the flows of popular control manifest themselves.¹⁰ The shared preoccupation with apparently “resonant,” “successful,” “popular” connections reveals well the mythical coherence of modernist research.

It is illuminating to observe the overlapping vocabularies of authors who—seen from the inside of modernist discourse—appear to take opposite positions in their judgment of popular media and politics. The idea of “resonant connection” has regularly been used in media-affirmative arguments, claiming that modern politics alienates people from itself and “has to be connected to the everyday culture of its citizens” (Van Zoonen 2005, 3) with the help of popular media programs that “simply make citizenship more pleasurable for more people” (*ibid.*, 147). At the same time, the same popular attachments have no less

¹⁰ The mythical assumption of “popular connections” as the prime sites where forces of (top-down and bottom-up) popular control manifest themselves has informed a classic text by Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” that arguably represents an end point of modernist theory building. Hall has explicitly argued for embracing the dialectical spirit of modern experience, that has been suppressed or “exterminated” (Bauman 1991), as I have argued earlier, by the rigid binarizing discourses of classical modernist research. In a dialectical spirit, Hall has explicitly called for embracing “the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside” mediated popular culture (Hall 2006, 478). This argument reveals Hall’s mythical assumption that the potentials of containment and resistance reside in popular “connections” or “resonances,” in instances when media and audiences connect. It is exactly these enigmatic connections that Hall has sought to address with his all-embracing model, which has offered a highly sophisticated understanding of the ambiguities of “the popular”—inside the mythical confines of the modernist discourse that has systematically veiled that “the popular” can be systematically misunderstood by the self-enclosed logic of modernist speculation.

frequently been interpreted as the prime mediators of political propaganda in today's irrational and superficial media era. In this view, popular resonance would be a key factor explaining the success of spectacular political campaigns over more substantial ones: "[T]he television emphasis on style over substance helped Bush, who was more telegenic and more affable in his ability to connect with viewers" than the much more competent Al Gore (Kellner 2001, 121). In spite of their antagonism, both enabling and disabling notions of popular connection have closely corresponded to the more neutral standpoint of voting behavior research, according to which "campaigns that are designed to take advantage of (or resonate with) voters' expectations are most likely to be effective" (Ansolabehere et al. 1997, 152). Political advertising has been interpreted along similar lines in modernist research. Promotions, accordingly, would "provide cultural linkages" and "establish resonance" between media/politics and people, and the "affective power" of mediatized politics would depend on how successfully the "connections are drawn" (Marshall 1997, 205). As the examples illustrate, resonant connections have been seen to be vital to both media power and audience power in modernist research.

The idea of "popular connection" may thus well be grasped as a conceptual "least common denominator" behind the antagonistic modernist concepts of mediatized politics (effects vs. gratifications, appeasement vs. empowerment, manipulation vs. engagement, "dumbing down" vs. "reaching out," and so on). Following the mythical idea of popular resonance, modernist media interpreters have been preoccupied with revealing correspondences between media texts/performances and audiences, looking for symmetries between the symbolic codes of the former and the cultural dispositions or activities of the latter. In modernist research, the TV shows, media channels, or political campaigns that in a given context appeared to "strike a chord" with the audience have widely been grasped as key sites where the basic dilemma of "Who controls whom?" can be addressed and resolved.

THE RULES OF POPULAR CONTROL

In modernist research, instances of popular connections have been commonsensically grasped as prime vehicles of popular control. Researchers have agreed that in today's media system, all voices that

aim to be publicly heard and accepted need to be “resonant,” or “popular”: actors have to speak in languages that people “own,” to enchant people with stories that they find appealing, to respect popular worries, to articulate people’s latent feelings of belonging, to connect them in exactly the way in which they themselves wish to be connected. Researchers have shared the mythical background wisdom that “a rhetorically effective object must be relevant to and resonant with the life of the audience,” that “rulers cannot successfully impose culture on people unless the political symbolism they choose connects to underlying native traditions” (Schudson 1989, 167). The other side of this common mythical belief has been to suggest that it is by establishing resonant “connections” with media texts and actors that people can take a certain control over the information, opinions, pleasures, and identities they seek for.

In modernist research, “resonant connections” have been regarded as the prime embodiments of a systemic “media logic” that incites, for good or bad, a seamless, harmonious convergence between media languages and audience vocabularies. In the modernist concept of popular “media logic” (Altheide and Snow 1979), the industrially planned strategies of “resonance making” (Ettema 2005) collide with popular vocabularies and experiences, a collision that enables media actors to control their audiences and audiences to get informed about the world and empower themselves, within certain limits.¹¹ Accordingly, popular media have widely been thought to impose a general principle of closeness and immediacy, urging actors to act and speak in harmony with popular affinities, to dissolve the symbolic distance that separates them from their audience. The populist “media logic” that would seamlessly merge media languages with popular vocabularies has become a standard image, commonly attributed to popular media by modernist scholars.

¹¹ “[W]ithin the context of a capitalist and entertainment oriented news media news and politics are immersed in the entertainment format. . . . The interaction and shared meanings of news workers who follow the entertainment format and audience members who ‘experience’ the world through these mass media lenses promote ‘sufficient communication’ to achieve the news organization’s goals of grabbing the audience while also enabling audience members to be ‘informed’ enough to exchange views with peers” (Altheide 2004, 293, 295).

Modernist researchers have agreed the popular media system multiplies “resonant connections” between actors and audiences, and, thus, fosters a convergence between the aesthetic styles and languages of programs, the media-tailored address of popular politics, and the cultural repertoires of the popular audience. The presumed convergence of popular media formats, mediatized political performances, and audience affinities, together with the idea that this convergence is fueled by the systemic logic of popular media, has been the most important tenet in the modernist research of popular media and politics.

In the modernist framework, supposed media languages and alleged audience dispositions have been expected to closely mirror each other and have been defined in a circular process. Accordingly, the cultural grammars attributed to newly emerging media formats have often reflected scholars’ opinion about the popular audience that the given media format has been supposed to attract and gratify. The circular understanding has manifested itself in the fact that popular media have often been simply characterized as “appealing,” “catchy,” or “easy-to-consume,” that is, by their alleged capacity to resonate with the popular audience. Indeed, most modernist terms describing the aesthetic codes of popular media (e.g., familiar, accessible, entertaining, attractive, “human interest”) represent nothing more than a type of “resonant” emotional response media would incite in the audience. Indeed, the very concept of “popular” media is itself a prime embodiment of circular thinking.

The circular conceptualization of media languages and audience vocabularies has greatly shaped the modernist understanding of popular media language. Consider, for example, the often-heard criticism that the logic of commercial television privileges “least common denominator” programming (e.g., De Bens 1998, Entman 1989, Gamson et al. 1992¹²)—this claim, arguably, reveals more about the (low) cultural dispositions attributed to common people than about commercial media formats themselves. To take another example, let us evoke Dan Nimmo and James Combs’s famous claim that popular television is governed

¹² “If publishers in a competitive market follow free enterprise norms of profit maximization, it is likely, Entman argues, that newspapers will provide a least common denominator product that attracts a mass audience and pleases advertisers” (Gamson et al. 1992, 377).

by “the dictates of the melodramatic imperative” that would “call for a clear plot line, sharply delineated characters, simply defined problems, no confusion over causes, and tailor-made solutions” (1983, 48). As Nimmo and Combs have made it clear, the “imperative” does not represent a self-enclosed televisual aesthetics, but the fact that “[i]t is the melodramatic logic . . . that attracts audiences” (1983, 26).¹³ Thus, in the end, television’s “melodramatic imperatives” do not represent anything else but the viewers’ dispositions: popular vocabularies that actors need to use in order to make their products achieve a “mythic adequacy” (1983, 27) in the eyes of viewers.¹⁴

¹³ Nimmo and Combs’s full argument looks like this: “[T]he logic of TV news is every bit as melodramatic as that of television entertainment programming. It is the melodramatic logic of TV news that attracts audiences. It makes TV a major source of news for most Americans, the sole source for a plurality and a believable source to a vast majority. It is also the melodramatic aspects that contribute to TV news in ‘priming’ its audiences” (1983, 26).

¹⁴ In the footsteps of Nimmo and Combs, campaign researcher Kathleen Hall Jamieson, has also established a seamless connection between the grammars of televisual address and the existing cultural repertoires of audiences. Jamieson’s claims regarding what “resonates” with the audience have closely intermingled with her claims about the dominant “grammar” of popular television. At an important point of her argument, the author addresses the reader: “Imagine, if you will, Saddam Hussein. Now conjure up Mother Teresa. It would be decidedly unwise to predicate a campaign on the assumption that the former is a saint or the latter a whore. At any moment in the life of a republic, the public can viscerally distinguish those presumed to be villainous from those presumed to be virtuous. Of such assumptions of virtue and villainy political discourse is made. Countering them is difficult—capitalizing on them simple” (1992, 44). These “visceral” identifications and contrastive “appositions,” according to Jamieson, can be powerfully amplified by public actors, if they “skillfully” exploit “television’s multiple modes of communication and powerful ability to orient attention” (50). Again:

“If the country has survived two centuries of politicking by telegraphic identification and apposition, why worry about them now? The answer is simple. Television has capacities that stump speakers, print barrages, and radio appeals lacked. When skillfully used, television’s multiple modes of communication and powerful ability to orient attention can invite strong, unthinking negative responses in low-involvement viewers. And, by overloading our information-processing capacity with rapidly paced information, televised political ads can short circuit the normal defenses that more educated, more highly involved viewers ordinarily marshal against suspect claims” (50).

The circular definition of popular media and audience languages, and the vision of an overall harmony between the two, have no less been typical to modernist “defenders” of popular media (or to more “neutral” observers). In his exhaustive analysis of today’s American political entertainment (e.g., *The West Wing* or *The Daily Show*), Jeffrey P. Jones has set an equation between what he saw as the overall spirit of “New Political Television” and the affinities and expectations of the audience.

What the success of new forms of political programming suggests . . . is that television has begun to explore multiple avenues for presenting politics in imaginative ways. . . . It also suggests that audiences are receptive to (if not hungry for) political programming that is meaningful and engaging to them, programming that connects with their interests and concerns, provides new ways of thinking about politics, and speaks to them through accessible and pleasurable means. (Jones 2005, 9)

The merging of media languages and audience dispositions that media critics have seen as a threat has been welcomed by popular media “sympathizers,” who have called for respectfully embracing the productive imagery, or “fictionality,” of popular politics. According to them, popular politics has integrated itself into popular media culture (Corner and Pels 2003) and incorporated its overall “fictional” logic. It is exactly this overall popular cultural/political/media/audience logic that John Street has addressed in an eloquent and widely cited passage: “Politics, like popular culture, is about creating an ‘audience,’ a ‘people’ who will laugh at their jokes, understand their fears and share their hopes. Both the popular media and politicians are engaged in creating works of popular fiction which portray credible worlds that resonate with people’s experiences” (Street 1997, 60).

Modernist observers have not had a separate vision about media languages and audience vocabularies, but envisioned the two to

Jamieson highlights “the evocative power of television’s visual grammar” and the “use of music to invite strong emotional reactions” (51). Self-evidently, the televisual grammar has been suggested to “resonate” with existing audience dispositions: people’s affinity with image and sound, and their “visceral” responsiveness to blunt moralizing and name-calling.

coalesce in general rules of popular connection, that would equally regulate production and reception, media actors' efforts to "control" their audiences and their efforts to control their own experiences. The seamless harmony between popular audience dispositions and popular media formats has been generally assumed in media research, as it may well be observed in the following excerpts that define the popular aesthetics of media in a circular way, as something that appeals to the people. The following excerpts represent quite common views in media research. (The italics are mine and are meant to point out authors' common affinity to conflate popular media aesthetics with popular audience dispositions.)

- "[T]abloidization reflects *consumer values* that may translate poorly into the policy sphere" (Entman and Bennett 200, 477)
- "[T]he adaptation of political appearances, rhetorics and leaders' images to presumed media requirements . . . now is taken for granted as commonplace—e.g., argument through crisp, *punchy and arresting* soundbites and the staging of political events with high *visual or symbolic appeal*" (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 206)
- "Pursuing the goals of profit in an era of intensified competition, the mainstream media became increasingly tabloid- and scandal-oriented. Politics, in turn, became focused on promoting image and spectacle and palatable soundbites *for easy consumption*" (Kellner 2001, 120)
- "Berlusconi focus[ed] his campaign . . . on trivialization—mixing politics with entertainment—and presenting himself as a political outsider . . . , bringing within the realm of politics many *features taken from everyday life* and other symbolic contexts: company efficiency, success in entrepreneurship, and economies and in sport. . . . Berlusconi's language, building on what the surveys were showing, became *simpler and closer to everyday life*" (Mancini 2007, 117)
- "Worried about falling audiences, the established news organizations have sought to change the way elections are covered to *maintain audience interest*" (Stanyer 2007, 115)
- "[T]abloid TV news simply means news *led by the audience's interests*—less pompous, less pedagogic, less male, more human, more vivacious, more demotic" (Sieghart 1997; quoted in McNair 2003, 51)

- “Politics is built on deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are *imbedded in the seemingly nonpolitical aspects of public and private life*. Entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant” (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001, 161)

Modernist research has distinguished four basic rules of popular control that would regulate the “connections” between public actors and audiences. These four key grammars of popular resonance have been:

- The rule of “familiarity” (a grammar of personal, human, local narratives that represent “us,” “our own” world)
- The rule of “genuine character” (stressing the competence, morality, style, personality, or strength of the actor)
- The rule of “emotionality” (a grammar of moralistic, [melo]dramatic, imaginative, flittering, forceful, humorous impulses)
- The rule of “simplicity” (preferring utterances that are short, clean-cut, obvious, understandable, nonelitist, linear, and straightforward)

Independently of their normative background, modernist scholars have believed that, in the field of mediatized politics, it is through the four resonant grammars that politicians can achieve popular success and audiences can meaningfully engage with politics. (The modernist concepts of the four rules of popular connection cannot be explored here in the main text, and will be analyzed in detail in online Appendix 3.)

Modernist scholarly research has found its mission in revealing how authentic (or fabricated), powerful (or weak), and enabling (or disabling) are the “resonant” popular connections that the systemic rules of popular media allow to emerge.

4.3. Liquid Binarizing: The Production of Unfalsifiable Narratives

By liquid binarizing I refer to the narrative-building strategies that have allowed scholars and experts to flexibly recombine their binaries in an effort to make sense of a contingent, complexifying, and trans-

forming (“liquid”) media reality. Of course, the modernist discourse has been a highly flexible system from the beginning. Its capacity to create new narratives by simply reversing elements in existing binary chains has been the most essential feature of its flexibility. “Overlapping reversed narratives” have been the prime embodiments of liquid binarizing.

Reversed narratives, however, have not always been flexible enough to grasp the complexities of “popular connections” and “liquid control.” Modernist binaries have often been thought to make too sharp distinctions that are too rigid to grasp the enigmatic ambiguity of “popular connections” (and their complex potentials to represent top-down effects and bottom-up agency, delusion and empowerment, activity and passivity). “Sorting out” these antagonistic power potentials has not been self-evident at all: modernist scholars have been well aware of, and indeed haunted by, the fact that the same “connection” can be interpreted in multiple incongruous ways, that two seemingly similar “connections” may induce highly different uses or effects, that any binary concept applied to a particular “connection” risks oversimplifying it. These tensions between modernist binary taxonomies and the empirical complexity of the world have been widely perceived—however, instead of explicating or critically addressing these felt tensions, modernist scholars have tried to appease them. The felt conflicts between a messy reality and clean-cut conceptual binaries might have cast doubts about the validity of the latter—however, these doubts have been neutralized in the end, and the scholarly belief has been maintained that “old” binaries can sensitively and properly grasp the complexities of a transforming media world. Sophisticated discursive strategies of “liquid binarizing” have been widely mobilized to mythically “appease” the tensions between discourse and reality, and to neutralize the dogmatic potential¹⁵ of modernist binaries.

¹⁵ Modernist theoretical innovations have usually started with rejecting the dogmatism of an existing binary narrative that has been found obsolete or rigidly polarizing. Competing scholarly approaches have sharply criticized each other’s binarizing narratives; however, as we will see, their critical engagements have never really put an end to binarizing itself, and mostly ended up in refashioning the same binary concepts that they had criticized.

In the following, three typical strategies of liquid binarizing will be presented. The first strategy lies in the creation of “weightless hybrids” (which means to openly acknowledge the hybridity of the world by melting the two poles of an established binary into a hybrid concept—like infotainment—and then to reintroduce the hybrid notion into established binarizing narratives). The second strategy follows a “schizophrenic” script (which processes by an “on the one hand, on the other hand” logic, makes contradictory claims but generally reasserts the superiority of one binary pole over the other). Finally, the third strategy will be called (borrowing an expression from Ien Ang [1998]) the building of “sponge” theories (this one steps beyond the first two strategies and aims to melt contradictory accounts into a relatively coherent theory, typically at the price of transforming the theory into a mythical language that is able to explain everything).

The strategies of liquid binarizing play a mythical function: they do not support a better understanding of reality but rather the reproduction of modernist binary taxonomies in seemingly less rigid and more sensitive forms. Liquid binarizing seems to give voice to the complexity of the world, but its real function is to close down the channels of all “unruly” feedback that could bring menace to the myth. Its discursive strategies allow scholars to produce accounts that cannot be falsified because their incongruence with reality is dissimulated. Media reality is endowed with mythical meaning, the myth of its intelligible transparency is preserved, and so is the integrity of the modernist discourse.

LIQUID BINARIZING STRATEGY 1: CREATING WEIGHTLESS HYBRIDS

With the rise of post- or late modernity, media researchers have become more and more aware of the tensions between straightforward binary concepts and the inner hybridity of media phenomena, the inevitable fact that antagonistic potentials are copresent in the very same object. Modernist binaries, with their polarizing lure, have increasingly been felt to be too rude to fit the complex and hybrid “connections” analyzed. There has been an increasing scholarly tendency to grasp the transformation of media and politics as a process of hybridization, in which old binaries—like the ones separating information and entertain-

ment, citizenship and consumption, the private and the public—collapse. However, in spite of appearances, the awareness of hybridity has not made researchers abandon their favorite binaries. On the contrary: declaring complexity and the death of old dualisms has been a key means by which modernist scholars could justify their own, more preferred binaries. Modernist scholars may have embraced hybrid media phenomena, however, they have not ceased to binarize them.

It is clear that modernist research in the last two decades has become saturated with fashionable hybrid concepts, each representing the recognition that a given binary (information vs. entertainment, reason vs. emotion, citizen vs. consumer, old vs. new media, and so on) has lost its interpretive edge. Scholarly awareness of hybridity has manifested itself: in neutral terms like “infotainment,” “politicotainment,” “docu-drama,” “citizen-consumers,” “prosumers,” or media “convergence”; in refashioned critical concepts like “free consent” (Hall 2005, 81),¹⁶ “lifestyle politics” (Bennett 2003), or “interactive spectacle” (Best and Kellner 1999); and in media-affirmative notions, like “emotional political intelligence” (Pels 2003, 57), “comic” or “popular intelligence” (Jones 2005, 98); “affective intelligence” or “fan democracy” (Van Zoonen 2004), “cultural citizenship” (Hermes 1998, 2005), “emotional public sphere” (Lunt and Stenner 2005), “entertaining politics” (Jones 2005), or “entertaining the citizen” (Van Zoonen 2005). By embracing hybrid concepts, it has been suggested several times, media research has got rid of its too rigid, binarizing ballasts.

However, seen from the myth-analytical approach that I am applying, it is clear that introducing new hybrid concepts has no consequence at all to the deep structures of mythical sense making. Hybrid concepts in themselves cannot stabilize their own meaning, which ultimately depends on the function that they fulfill in the binary chains—narratives—into which they are inserted. And modernist narratives themselves have not been “hybridized” at all. Instead of abandoning the polarizing spirit of modernist analysis in the name of media hybridity, most scholars have contented themselves with merely inserting hybrid concepts into preexisting narratives. The wide-

¹⁶ “[T]he weakness of the earlier Marxist positions lay . . . in their inability to explain the role of the ‘free consent’ of the governed to the leadership of the governing classes under capitalism” (Hall 2005, 81).

spread usage of hybrid concepts in scholarly discourse has served less to acknowledge media complexity, but simply to open new planes on which the same old modernist narratives could be reperformed and readjusted to the contemporary media environment.

The notion “infotainment” exemplifies well the strategy of creating weightless hybrids. Today it is common wisdom that the old categories of information and entertainment have merged into “infotainment.” Most scholars would certainly refrain themselves from drawing the line between information-seeking and entertainment-seeking audiences, or factual and fictional genres as sharply as their predecessors. However, this awareness of hybridity has not helped to rewrite modernist scholarly narratives themselves. The academic study of infotainment does not really differ from earlier studies of either factual or entertainment media. Modernist scholars may have become beware of not praising either educative news programs or Madonna clips as the ultimate cure to the problems of democracy, however, they have kept inquiring about whether and how “infotainment” can work as either “information” (substantive or manipulative) or “entertainment” (debilitating or liberating).

The scholarly assertion that infotainment is a new and hybrid media genre has regularly been followed by the question of how this or that infotainment format may fulfill citizenship functions that elevate it above the realm of private consumerly pleasures, or, on the contrary, how it can give voice to the, so far suppressed, “popular.” In other words, “infotainment” has simply been inserted into preexisting modernist narratives, and its relevance has been judged in the same terms in which a rationalist like Habermas has judged highbrow print media outlets, or in which a populist like Fiske (1989, 1996) has theorized the liberating function of popular entertainment like Rambo movies or Madonna clips. Along these lines, infotainment has been theorized in various ways, each of them reperforming existing, well-established research narratives. Accordingly, infotainment has been interpreted either as entirely apolitical and irrelevant (Sparks 2000; McNair 2003, 68), or as an efficient source of publicly relevant information about daily politics (Graber 1994; Jones 2005), or an emotional anchor helping people to come to terms with the democratic political system in which they live (Van Zoonen 2005), or a source of a spectacular thrill and entertainment that misinforms people on social issues, espe-

cially crime (Prior 2005).¹⁷ In each of these cases, the phenomena of “infotainment” has merely served as a new field to where decades-old debates, claims, and narratives could be transferred.

A particularly illuminating example of the transfer may be found in an argument by Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini who have declared “the inherent arbitrariness of the news-entertainment distinction” (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001, 162) and asserted that the real distinction should be made between “democratically useful media” (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011, 282) and democratically useless media forms. It is easy, however, to recognize that the authors have merely transferred the binary of news vs. entertainment to the plane of infotainment and simply made it reappear in another form, as a new distinction (between democratically useful and useless communications), the “inherent arbitrariness” of which has not yet been so commonsensically acknowledged. Thus, the transfer has not brought any substantial renewal, just a new site to contemplate upon the same eternal and irresolvable dilemmas that have driven modernist media research since the beginning.

Hybrid concepts do not necessarily bear the traces of the binary counterconcepts that they combine. The concept of “engagement,” for example, is not any less hybrid than “infotainment.” By audience

¹⁷ It may be worth modeling these four narratives as four “binary chains” that rewrite the conventional, nonhybrid understanding of information and entertainment.

The original, non-hybrid, elitist-rationalist narrative: information (¬ entertainment) : public (¬ private) : important (¬ unimportant) : abstract (¬ simple) : substance (¬ surface) : rational (¬ emotional) : fact (¬ fiction) : falsifiable (¬ mythical) : unbiased (¬ biased)

Alternative 1 (Jones): “infotainment” (¬ entertainment) : public (¬ private) : important (¬ unimportant) : simple (¬ abstract) : emotional (¬ rational)

Alternative 2 (Sparks): “infotainment” (¬ information) : private (¬ public) : simple (¬ abstract) : fiction (¬ fact) : mythical (¬ falsifiable) : biased (¬ unbiased)

Alternative 3 (Van Zoonen): “infotainment” (¬ information) : substance (¬ surface) : important (¬ unimportant) : abstract (¬ simple) : emotional (¬ rational) : fiction (¬ fact) : mythical (¬ falsifiable)

Alternative 4 (Prior): “infotainment” (¬ entertainment) : public (¬ private) : biased (¬ unbiased) : fact (¬ fiction) : falsifiable (¬ mythical) : simple (¬ abstract)

engagement, modernist scholars and media experts have meant a form of mobilization that is media-triggered and at the same time based on the active, self-conscious consent of the audience. It may be worth invoking here Peter Dahlgren's eloquent and plausible (even "too" plausible, "mythically" plausible) argument about the political relevance of audience engagement with popular media. Dahlgren argues that

pleasure and civic usefulness need not a priori be incompatible. . . . [G]iven certain conditions, popular television journalism can be used productively for civic goals beyond individual pleasure. . . . The popular formats can clearly attract and engage audiences on a large scale. They are pleasurable in many ways, stimulate the production of meaning, and enter into the popular discourses of everyday life. The basic problem generally is that the engagement that they mobilize is usually not aimed at the societal domain and the subject positions on offer do not normally coincide with the identity of the citizen. (Dahlgren 1998, 94–95)

This short excerpt condenses in itself all the modernist interpretive tropes and strategies I have addressed so far. First, Dahlgren addresses here popular connections, "pleasures," that are fostered by attractive "popular formats" (modernist trope no. 1). Second, he suggests that these formats are not random but condense in themselves the institutional logic of the field of "popular television journalism" (modernist trope no. 2). Third, he rejects dogmatically debunking these popular formats and pleasures as vain entertainment that has nothing to do with politics. Fourth, he opens up a new plane to address the productive and meaningful "engagements" that popular TV formats mobilize (modernist trope no. 3). And fifth, Dahlgren ends up in regretfully asserting what the rationalist branches of modernist research have always known: popular engagements, after all, "do not normally coincide" with politically relevant actions and identities. Dahlgren's is a typical maneuver of liquid binarizing, in which he steps beyond the rigid binary of frivolous private pleasures and serious civic usefulness, opens a new plane, that of popular "engagement," and reproduces on this plane the old modernist narrative of rationalist critique.

The discursive strategy has been a universal reaction of modernist social theory to late modern complexity. It is, indeed typical to all cul-

tural and social theories which start by asserting the collapse of a rigid and obsolete binary and end up in reintroducing the same opposition “through the back door” (as one critique has objected to Giddens for rebinarizing his structuration theory [see Bagguley 2003, 144]). Accordingly, by embracing “infotainment” and other hybrid formats that would allegedly flourish in the ruins of outdated binaries, media scholars have simply created new planes where the same binaries could be transferred. In this virgin terrain, the old binarizing disputes of modernist media research could be reanimated and continued without being disturbed. The widespread usage of “weightless hybrids” has never been meant to genuinely face the elusive complexity of today’s media world. On the contrary: the mythical function of weightless hybrids has been to domesticate media complexity, to reconcile it with existing binary models, to neutralize the challenge that it may bring to modernist mythmaking—in a word, to save the modernist taxonomic system that could not be maintained in an unchanged form.

LIQUID BINARIZING STRATEGY 2: SCHIZOPHRENIC NARRATIVE BUILDING

The more complex the late modern media system has become, the more scholars have tried to broaden the scope of their narratives and to make them compatible with multiple realities and the various competing narratives that represent these realities. In order to save the integrity of their core narrative, many scholars have tended to opportunistically perform antagonistic narratives at the same time, without making their arguments harmonize with each other. Scholars’ incentives to build such multidimensional shields around their key narratives has brought to their accounts a certain “schizophrenic” character. “Schizophrenic” narrative building means to expand a narrative to complex media realities with the help of mutually contradictory arguments. This has been the second of the three strategies of liquid binarizing.

For an illustration, let us turn to an excerpt taken from Colin Sparks’s introduction to his coedited volume *Tabloid Tales*. The excerpt, in its present form, is not even “schizophrenic” (which always involves a certain effort to self-concealment) but openly self-contradictory. To show this, I have allowed myself to copy together the opening and the concluding phrase of the section that Sparks has devoted to

“the limits of tabloid knowledge.” In the original text, the two phrases are separated by a two-page-long argument, so their contradiction is far less apparent.

Even if *we accept entirely* the force of the positions advanced by the defenders of the tabloid and acknowledge that there are elements of the form that constitute a genuine widening, and thus democratization, of public life. . . . [T]he successes of the tabloid form demonstrate very clearly that it can address the individual as consumer, but there can be equally *little doubt that it has little or nothing* to contribute to the life of the citizen. (Sparks 2000, 28–29; emphasis added)

In the excerpt, as it is the case with most “schizophrenic” arguments, contradictory positions are only halfheartedly adopted: the author clearly shows his preference for one of the adopted poles, but he can also claim to have done justice to the other one.

Following this strategy clearly pays off for the researcher, who may allow, for example, that in the digital age, popular culture “is constructed by the actor, self-produced and self-consumed,” but who can also assert that these efforts, after all, are prestructured since “there is one common language, the language of the hypertext” (Castells 2000, 21). In a similar way, the analyst may allow that in today’s individualized late modern societies “self-directed people are searching for authentic meaning” but also remind the reader that in their journey people are “guided by media and external social authorities” (Kellner 2003, 172). Schizophrenic narrative building allows, to take a third example, one to warn against naive “suggestions that popular culture speaks for the people” (Street 1997, 18¹⁸) and to declare that “politics, like popular culture, is about creating an ‘audience,’ a ‘people’ who will laugh at their jokes, understand their fears and share their hopes” (Street 1997, 60). The same strategy allows to declare the rise of a “convergence culture” that would obsolete the old antagonism between passive consumers and powerful producers, and to reinstate

¹⁸ “[T]he legitimating convention of [market] populism is, of course, that ‘the people’ are simply the product of their choices, and as such represent an objective social fact which the market reveals” (Street 1997, 153).

the same opposition on the next page, claiming that there exist “two kinds of media power: one comes through media concentration, where any message gains authority simply by being broadcast on network television, the other comes through collective intelligence, where a message gains visibility only if it is deemed relevant to a loose network of diverse publics” (Jenkins 2006, 180).

Schizophrenic narrative building has been a typical coping strategy that scholars have followed in order to deal with the contradictions imprinted into their binarizing discourse. As these instances clearly illustrate, schizophrenic narrative building is motivated by the researcher’s effort to distance herself from a one-sided position in which she feels implicated. The main promise of the “schizophrenic” script has been that the self-distancing could be efficiently done: that the so far suppressed pole could be efficiently reconciled with the preferred pole, and both could be adopted into an “expanded,” “broadened,” more inclusive narrative, without, of course, losing the binary edge of the narrative.

LIQUID BINARIZING STRATEGY 3: WRITING “SPONGE THEORIES”

The “schizophrenic” strategy could maintain contradictory positions because it has never treated these positions as equals and never questioned one’s primacy over the other. A dominant claim (e.g., that “popular media is politically irrelevant”) has never really been endangered by the alternative, subaltern position. In such cases, embracing the alternative position has been a mere rhetorical gesture aimed at defending the dominant claim from the charge of dogmatism (“but I have never denied that popular media may be politically relevant in certain conditions!”). The opportunistic strategy has efficiently helped scholars to expand their narratives; however, all this has not enhanced the chance of real theoretical innovation inside the modernist discourse.

The most creative innovators in modernist discourse, however, have never relied on opportunism and have not hesitated to employ antagonistic concepts to challenge each other. However, the more these theoreticians have sought to do justice to both poles of modernist binaries, the more they have had to expand their narratives to a level where they have lost their very contours. The hurdles of such “sponge theories” (as Ien Ang [1998] once characterized the work of

Dennis McQuail) manifest themselves with particular clarity in the work of Stuart Hall. With all of his innovative attempts to theorize our “New Times” and the key role our era grants to “the popular,” Hall has clearly been a founding father of the neo-orthodox articulation of the popular media age.

Hall’s eloquent analysis of the cultural appeal of Thatcherism qualifies him among the very first modernist researchers of late modern mediatized politics. Rejecting the outdated opposition of “pure ‘autonomy’ [and] total encapsulation” (Hall 2006, 82) that in his view has characterized contemporary theories, Hall proposed a more refined model in his analysis of Thatcherism. The unquestionable popular appeal of this movement, Hall has argued, should neither be mistaken as a fully genuine popular will-formation and nor as a capitalist ideological indoctrination. Hall has introduced instead a hybrid, recombined category, that of “free consent,” which he believed represented the genuine element in people’s engagement with the key tropes of Thatcherism (like the free market or the nanny state). Tracing the success of these tropes back to people’s “active consent,” which had grown out of their genuine life experiences (e.g., their consumerly pleasures), Hall has refused to see Thatcherism as merely “ideological” and reinstated it as “hegemonic.” However, realizing that his analysis of populist hegemony may lack a critical potential, Hall has distinguished, with a move that may be familiar from my earlier examples, two possible articulations of hegemony: “authoritarian populism” and the “popular-democratic.” The first is Thatcherism, and the second represents, in Jim McGuigan’s words, “the incorruptible side of Hall’s binary opposition” (McGuigan 1992, 26), which, as Hall himself has made explicit, is simply “not available to the political Right” (Hall 1988, 140; quoted in McGuigan 1992, 16).

As Hall’s example makes clear, in the modernist universe, attempts to transcend the felt “rigidity” of binary concepts risk leading to a contourless position which may be unacceptable even for the researcher. In such cases, both the analyst and her readership seek to rebinarize the narrative, which provides it with new contours but deprives it from its originality. All this makes it, in the end, practically impossible to tell what exact position the author has taken in relation to the analyzed object. Since the author claims a bit of everything, she can be criticized for anything. This has been the fate of Hall’s analysis. One

critical current has argued that Hall has never left behind the classical model of ideological indoctrination: “[T]he truth conditions for this version of the theory of hegemony are very similar Adorno’s theory of mass popular culture. . . . For both positions, popular culture has an ideological force and both have to submit to similar tests of that force” (Abercrombie 1990, 202; quoted in McGuigan 1992, 66). By contrast, another critical approach has debunked Hall for the opposite reasons, arguing that he has “learnt too much from Thatcherism” and enacted a very “ambiguously populist embrace of consumer capitalism” as a liberating force (McGuigan 1992, 38), being “peculiarly complicit with the *populist* delusions fostered by the political Right” (McGuigan 1992, 41; italics in the original). Meanwhile, a third criticism has suggested that, in spite of all the efforts to theorize the “middle ground,” Hall’s conceptual inventions have reproduced the rigid binary opposition of indoctrination and purely authentic culture (Simons 2003, 181–82).

As Hall’s example makes clear, genuine theoretical innovation in the modernist universe resembles a war fought on multiple fronts which gradually eats up the hinterland. In the moment when the hinterland is consumed, when the researcher cannot be identified with a paramount position, the theory ceases to work as a narrative and transforms itself into a general, unfalsifiable, mythical language. Arguably, it is the most complex and reflexive modernist theories that have condensed into themselves the highest mythical forces of their discourse. These works have functioned as all-embracing “sacred texts”: they have provided their followers with all the conceptual means necessary to answer any possible objection and explain with ease even the most unexpected empirical phenomena, they have offered themselves for any imaginable usage, and in consequence, they have lost their ability to point to their outer limits of validity and moved far beyond the reach of scientific falsification.

4.4. Inflating the Modernist Bubble: Self-Reproduction through Self-Expansion

The essence of the neo-orthodox innovation that characterizes the modernist discourse on popular media lies in transferring established, orthodox concepts to newly emerging, complex, contradictory terri-

stories, and through this act of discursive colonization, domesticating these chaotic phenomena, maintaining the belief that they are manageable and made intelligible with established modernist tools. In order to console modernist taxonomies with an ever-changing world, researchers have constantly repaired, reinvented, and retailored them with the aim of making them fit the analyzed media reality better. However, this has not led to a true acceptance of media complexity, but instead to the replication of old modernist tropes in mythical, unfalsifiable forms which make binarizing statements complex enough to be defended from the charges of dogmatism and yet still allow them to “reinvent the wheel” and retell old tales, inside the safe burdens of the tradition.

These mechanisms of neo-orthodox innovation have fed a “speculative bubble,” a mythical interpretive universe that imposes itself on all imaginable media phenomena and effectively resists any attempt to set the limits of its validity. The bubblelike dynamics suggests that the modernist discourse can reproduce itself only by aggressively reconfiguring and expanding itself. My concluding arguments will explore the link between self-reproduction and self-expansion.

In the previous sections, I have presented the modernist discourse as an extremely productive meaning-making machine that provides experts with a familiar toolkit allowing for quick and easy narrative building. Indeed, as I have shown, to create a new narrative within the modernist discourse, it has been enough to slightly modify an established narrative, or “binary chain”: to reverse one of its binaries, to insert a hybrid concept into it, or simply to supplement it with a new binary. Modernist narratives could be created by a single move: once the move has been done, the stories have written themselves almost automatically—and this allowed for the extreme burgeoning of modernist accounts.

However, the productive mechanism has been deeply paradoxical. The price to be paid for the ease of creating new narratives by simply modifying a few elements in established binary chains has been that all accounts have been highly overlapping. As we have seen, in the mythical universe of modernist discourse, all existing narratives, even the most antagonistic ones, have been direct neighbors (and their authors “competing accomplices”), and new accounts stemmed directly and rather predictably from earlier narratives. These conceptual overlaps

have brought two basic, and antagonistic, consequences. First, they have stabilized the position of narrators-researchers. The individual researcher could justify her account for deploying key problems all other accounts are self-evidently concerned with. At the same time, the overlaps that have melted modernist narratives into a well-defendable mythical "fortress" also made these accounts highly vulnerable individually. Since every account has been only one step away from its own negation, researchers have faced immense difficulties in defending their own position against alternative narratives which have been addressing exactly the same questions. In the field of modernist discourse, all claims could be immediately debunked in the name of well-established neighboring narratives. Indeed, individual accounts have simply been too familiar for potential critics, who could easily identify which single binary item in the proposed binary sequence needs to be modified (reversed, merged to a hybrid item, or replaced with another item) in order to undermine the whole narrative.

Modernist narratives have been one-step neighbors and thus extremely vulnerable; however, at the same time, they could also be defended with an equal ease: their author could reshape them, reinvent them, expand them, refine them, or enrich them by simply supplementing them with new or recombined binaries. In consequence, modernist accounts have been in a state of constant flux, permanently refining themselves in response to the potential challenges arriving from neighboring accounts. This pattern of continuous self-recombination, characterized with the general term "liquid binarizing," has allowed researchers to secure their narratives, to make them stand on multiple legs and assert their relevance to multiple, complex, hybrid media realities. By flexibly refining their binary narratives, modernist researchers could "domesticate" the complexity of the world and neutralize the danger that it represents to their highly insecure individual positions on the field of academic discourse. Thus, modernist researchers have formed an interpretive community of cooperating-competing accomplices who work on "domesticating" media reality in order to preserve the integrity of their individual positions and also of their mythical discourse.

The key modernist discursive strategies presented so far (reversals and counterreversals, recombinations, weightless hybrids, schizophrenic narratives, sponge theories) have all been aimed at adjusting

complex media realities to modernist taxonomies, instead of revising the latter in light of the former.¹⁹ Strategies of liquid binarizing have served scholars with a delicate weaponry that they could use to account for the existing complexity of the world and to build clean-cut, binarizing narratives at the very same time.

These apparently antagonistic goals could only be achieved by mythical means. This means that the incongruences between discourse and reality have not been suppressed, but “sidelined.” Modernist scholars have not been so naive as to uncritically praise their binary concepts: they knew well that their imperfect concepts deviated from complex media realities, and this is exactly why they poured so much energy into handling these discrepancies; this is why they did their best to avoid any direct confrontation between their binaries and the empirically observable complexity of the media world. This “bracketing” of irresolvable discrepancies between the world and the modernist discourse has been the very key to the latter’s mythical power, that is, its ability to preserve the identity of its generative binaries throughout their permanent “recombinations,” its power to assure that its key binaries travel unaffected across research fields and generations.

The mythical “bracketing” could be achieved because the recombinations, hybrid concepts, sponge theories, and schizophrenic arguments have allowed media scholars to address media complexity in a way that is not a priori incompatible with the sharply binarizing conclusions that they have sought to draw. The discursive strategies have allowed scholars to present a rich and complex analysis of media reality with the help of the very same set of binaries that equally served as the ammunition of a more sharpened and polarized analysis when it came to establishing general trends or drawing theoretical conclusions. In the modernist discourse, complex empirical analysis and binarized theory

¹⁹ Indeed, in the modernist strategies to grasp media complexity I have revealed the undisturbed dominance of the same binarized concepts and narratives, that have reproduced themselves throughout their various “recombinations,” that have imposed themselves on the weightless conceptual “hybrids” invented by researchers, and have driven the “schizophrenic” embracement of contradictory positions. The same binaries have manifested their epistemic power in the fact that the “sponge theories” attempting to step beyond them could so easily lose their contours and get “rebinarized” by their followers, even authors.

building have drawn upon a common repertoire of binary taxonomies, and due to this kinship they could be silently reconciled. Strategies of liquid binarizing have allowed scholars to immerse themselves in fine empirical details (hybridities, ambiguities, simultaneously present antagonistic potentials, etc.), while keeping in the background that the most plausible outcome of their research would be a polarized and sharp binary statement. Meanwhile, when making clean-cut normative claims or drawing polarizing conclusions, scholars could easily put the empirical complexity of their research object (the proof that the given narrative is not dogmatic) “on hold.”

The evidence of media complexity has not been suppressed in modernist discourse—but it has been kept away from the key, and always binarized, conclusions that researchers have sought to establish. The two have rarely been brought on the same plane; instead, scholars have incessantly been jumping from one plane to the other throughout their narratives. By operating the mythical “turnstile,” modernist researchers could mythically suppress the fact that their binarizing narratives have been unable to cover the experienced complexity of media, in other words, to resolve the deep, enigmatic ambiguity imprinted into all “connections” between media and audience.

The “turnstile” of mythmaking, as Roland Barthes’s classic text has taught us, is activated when actors seek to resolve the controversies and dilemmas arising from a well-established, familiar meaning-making system within the confines of the very same system. What mythical discourses do, in other words, is a Munchausen-like trick: they provide us with means to work through the tensions that they themselves have created. They do this by neutralizing the contradictions between their conceptual and taxonomic conventions and the experienced world they try to make sense of. Key to this neutralizing maneuver, Barthes has suggested, is to keep the purity of their concepts and the complexity of the described world at the very same time, inside the same common mythical space, by delegating pure concepts and messy realities, so to say, to safely distant corners, so that their controversies can never sharpen enough to endanger the coherence of the myth.

Barthes has grasped the dialectics with the notion of “form” (abstract, simple, clear concepts) and “meaning” (the intuitive, “embedded” understanding of a messy reality). For Barthes,

the essential point in all this is that the form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there. It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. (Barthes 1972b, 118)

One could hardly find a better metaphor for modernist media interpretation than that of a constant hide-and-seek, in which the analyst brackets off the complexity of the world in order to assert a clean-cut, binary narrative, while she also defends her narrative against the charge of rigidity by asserting her awareness about the complexity of the world. This perpetual hide-and-seek has allowed modernist "cultural forms"—the binarized interpretive tropes of the modernist discourse—to reproduce themselves in time and across scholarly fields, to crystallize themselves into ever-present, inescapable meaning structures.

However, this has been a Pyrrhic victory. In the game of hide-and-seek, modernist interpretive tropes could always evade the challenge of true renewal, so they have not developed at all. Surely, they have become "natural," self-evident, and familiar interpretive structures, allowing analysts to build up the same set of plausible narratives about any media phenomena. Modernist tropes have become self-evident means for a quick scanning, for a distant review of the potential meanings and effects of any newly emerging form of mediatized "popular connection." However, when it came to a deeper analysis, modernist tropes have forced researchers into running endless circles around dilemmas that could never be resolved within the modernist universe.

Paradoxically enough, the stasis, the lack of development, has resulted from the discourse's flexibility that its protagonists have seen as the very key to its ability to catch up with the ever-transforming media reality. Modernist researchers have been fascinated by this flexibility and enjoyed the capacity of their discourse to seamlessly devour

all sorts of new, unexpected, contingent empirical evidence.²⁰ In this framework, scholars have poured all their energies into increasing the sophistication of their accounts to such an extent that no unexpected evidence could prove them wrong. However, the seemingly infinite flexibility of modernist discourse has enabled researchers to avoid specifying the limits beyond which their accounts are not valid. In consequence, the unexpected idiosyncrasies of the world could only appear in well-polished, “domesticated” forms in modernist discourse²¹—closing down the ways to revise and repair the structural imperfections of the taxonomic system itself.

In academia, the discrepancies between media-interpreting discourse and media reality has been mythically “bracketed off” rather than self-reflexively eliminated. The logic of this mythical “bracketing” has pushed scholars into relentlessly “reinventing” their orthodox discourse in all possible forms, at all possible fields. Scholars have fled, in a word, into a permanent rush to innovate and to forget about

²⁰ The relentless efforts of modernist scholars to make their narratives more sophisticated by expanding and recombining them have not resolved the inner controversies of the modernist “binary machine.” On the contrary: the more intensely scholars have sought to establish acceptably “complex” binary narratives, the less they could distance themselves from the inherent biases encoded into their basic interpretive tropes. Chasing the enigma of popular connection and control, researchers have made themselves blind to the fact that the paradoxes of “popular connection” (whether and when it is enabling or disabling), or the ambiguities of the “locus of control” (“who controls whom” in which context) can never be sorted out, however innovatively one might recombine modernist binaries. As I have shown, it is illusory to believe that the modernist “binary machine” could helpfully distinguish the opposite potentials. In fact, the contrary has been the case. As we have seen, modernist narratives asserting either of the poles could never save themselves from being turned upon their head. In consequence, the boundaries between submissive and empowering usages, media power and audience power, and citizenship and consumption have been extremely porous and illusory.

²¹ Unexpected feedback from media reality have been “domesticated” and never allowed to brake the mythical frames asserting the “popularity,” the “rule-governed normality,” and the “transparent complexity” of the late modern media system. Unexpected empirical evidence could not make scholars abandon their inherited binaries by which they have grasped media popularity and the rules of popularity.

the imperfection, the instability, the very defenselessness of their former innovations. Incessantly running ahead to escape from its own past inadequacies, modernist discourse has become an expansive, “nomadic” interpretive practice that can very efficiently “conquer” (impose its prestructured concepts on) any newly emerging media phenomena but necessarily gets to a theoretical “impasse” (Heath 1990) at each field where it gains foothold, thus, needs to be exported to newer and newer terrains in order to be kept alive.

The imprinted, structural link between self-reproduction and self-expansion explains why it is reasonable to see modernist media analysis as a self-inflating bubble which “reinvents the wheel” at each terrain that it absorbs. The flexible practices of modernist sense making, I have argued so far, have not embraced media complexity but expanded the same binary concepts and taxonomies everywhere. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the modernist practices of “liquid binarizing” are disconnecting us from media reality and inflate unfalsifiable, mythical “bubbles” in which the chaotic, dark, alien side of media reality is outshouted in the parade of its self-justifying expert representations.

Modernist mythmaking could evade real confrontation with reality due to its ability to provide flexible and prompt answers to the challenge of media complexity. Its versatility, the very ease of quickly producing sophisticated accounts, has represented an irresistible draw to modernist mythmakers, whose affinity for flexible myths may well be taken as another proof of their deep implication in the collective imagery of “liquidity.”

Chapter 5

The Myth of “Active Control” in Media-Interpreting Industries

This chapter will analyze how popular media and mediatized social life have been mythicized in the industrial branches of the fifth estate.

Nonacademic media experts in the industries of marketing, PR, and political consultancy have typically envisioned a much sharper cleavage between the past and the present than academics. They have focused on the “newness” of the popular media age that they contrasted with yesterday’s era of broadcast media. In the emphatically “new” age of popular media, experts have suggested, media-immersed audience-citizens can hardly be connected and controlled with old techniques, which have lost their adequacy with the rise of today’s media environment.

The “new” media and political landscape has commonly been characterized with the mythical notion of “activity” that would distinguish today’s media world from the more “passive” settings of the past. According to this shared narrative, the relatively passive mass audience of broadcast television (similarly to the class-based, loyal constituency of the mass party) has been transformed into a more selective, disloyal, attraction-seeking and elusive media consumership. The transformations have been thought to mirror structural changes in media: the rise of a new systemic environment (competitive, media-rich, spectacular, interactive, complex, and turbulent) which has dethroned the old broadcast landscape (marked by a repetitive, unidirectional “flow” of moderate, balanced and familiar programs on a few privileged channels).

Media-interpreting “industries” have defined popular media audiences in opposition to the “mass” audience of broadcast media (moderately interested, equally sharing its attention among all sorts of programs in the TV flow, unengaged, nonaddicted, relatively loyal, but also too distant to switch channels/opinions/parties frequently). Of course, the commonly propagated idea that today’s audiences are more “active” than their predecessors has not been uniquely meant to suggest that they would be more empowered or self-directed in their media usage. Increased audience “activity” could also be defined in terms of a higher degree of elusiveness, a proneness to fanatic addiction, or the intense enjoyment of attractive impulses. The commonly shared idea of popular agency has suggested that today, people have the means to respond affirmatively only to what they “really” need or like, to express their preferences and to bypass the media voices that try to educate or enlighten them in the name of the higher good. What experts differed in is the judgment of where they saw the agency leads the popular audience: liberation or willing self-submission.¹

¹ To illustrate how people with very different normative background have stood on the common platform, let me evoke the propagandist Karl Rove and the experience marketers Joseph Pine and James Gilmore (see Pine and Gilmore 1999). Pine and Gilmore’s “experience marketing” theory has suggested that today, “increasingly, people decide what to buy based on how authentic they perceive it to be, and that authenticity is self-defined.” (Ehret 2009) Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a propagandist, like Karl Rove, debating this core idea. In Rove’s view, the main mission of politics lies exactly in feeding people’s self-defined authenticity demands. In fact, this is the key point where Rove distinguishes his vision from that of conventional politics. According to Rove, whether politics is authentic and genuine is purely a matter of people’s subjective imagination. To be authentic, a political act does not have to be anchored to structural, systemic realities, as it has falsely been prescribed by the outdated ideals of what Rove has called the “reality-based community” (Soros 2009, 42).

What does “self-defined authenticity” mean and where does this emanation of “active” popular agency lead? To a higher respect for the media-based images that customers individually draw for themselves about products’ genuineness, or to an unprecedentedly remorseless propaganda? The notion of self-defined authenticity, in itself, can hardly answer this question. The answer lies in the binarizing modernist narratives (long-established stories of propaganda or consumer empowerment) into which this contourless notion is inserted. The idea of “self-defined authenticity” exemplifies well

Media-interpreting industries have relied on modernist binaries just as heavily as academic media studies in their speculations about today's media and audiences. Can we connect and control today's active audience, experts have asked countless times, or will they themselves control whom they would like to connect with? Can we control them in a way that allows them to control themselves, and, instead of connecting them, can we urge them to connect us by their own will? This type of questioning implies a key assumption: that today's increasingly active, selective, and elusive audience can still be connected and controlled, and it is possible to unravel the "new rules" of connection and control.

Practitioner handbooks addressing the "new rules of connection/control" have become superabundant in the fields of marketing and PR. It is enough to evoke here that the best-selling PR book at Amazon.com has been entitled *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*.² The book starts with various appraisals which univocally celebrate the author's revelatory vision about the "new rules" of efficient communication.

Revolution may be an overused word in describing what the Internet has wrought, but revolution is exactly what David Meerman Scott embraces and propels forward in this book. He exposes the futility of the old media rules and opens to all of us an insiders' game, previously played by a few well-connected specialists. With this rule book to the online revolution, you can learn how to win minds and markets, playing by the new rules of new media.³

that the key concepts of modernist sense making are entirely weightless in themselves, since their meaning is defined with the help of crystallized and unchanging binary narratives. Moreover, the fact that a remorseless political propagandist like Rove and two enthusiastic believers of consumer empowerment like Pine and Gilmore have shared the same core idea demonstrates also that in the mythical space of modernist discourse, even the bitterest foes are one-step neighbors.

² According to data available in February 2012 (Scott 2007).

³ Let me add here three other appraisals using the same rhetoric:

"A great guide for large and small companies alike to navigate the 'new rules.'"

"[Scott] goes far beyond technology and explores the ramifications of the web as it pertains to people. He sets down a body of rules to show you how to negotiate those ramifications with maximum effectiveness."

“What are the new rules of connecting/controlling the active audience?”—this obligate question has become the ultimate starting point of modernist speculations about popular media and political systems, and the main concern of public actors and their strategists. “Connecting/controlling the active audience”—which, in the following, will be referred to as “active control”—has proved to be an extremely productive discursive trope that has generated an incredible amount of expert theories and techniques (e.g., engagement marketing, impression management, event marketing, experiential marketing, etc.). It is vital to recognize that the trope could become so forceful because it has innovatively combined two notions that the conventional logic of modernist analysis has kept apart: the notion of top-down “control” and that of bottom-up “audience activity.” However, this combination has not opened a way beyond modernist binarizing—in fact, the contrary has been the case. The combination of control and activity has been a successful emanation of “liquid binarizing.”

The widely shared idea of “active control” may have been rhetorically powerful, but in more substantive terms it has been entirely weightless. Similarly to the other hybrid concepts mentioned in the previous chapter, like infotainment or emotional intelligence, the idea of “active control” has never put an end to the binarizing, polarizing practices of expert media analysis—on the contrary, it has served to fuel and expand these practices. The underlying idea of active control has allowed media experts to formulate seemingly innovative and forward-looking insights about “engagement” or “experience” or “attention,” to assert their openness to media complexity, and to stick to their sharp binary diagnoses at the very same time. For example, the idea of active control has allowed the authors of marketing and PR manuals to stress the contingency of any communicative attempt to reach today’s elusive audiences, but also to enumerate the apparent communication techniques that should be followed if one aims to step on the “road to victory” (Faucheux 1998). In this case, the idea of “active control” has allowed some modernist experts to reassert their rigid stimulus-

“Teaches readers how to launch a thought leadership campaign by using the far-reaching, long-lasting tools of social media. It is an invaluable guide for anyone who wants to make for themselves, their ideas and their organization.”

response model while also claiming to be sensitive to postmodern contingencies.

Instead of opening new terrains for theorizing, the hybrid notion of “active control” has done nothing more than giving a new impetus to the modernist game of “hide and seek,” the mythical production of sharp binarizing conclusions and seemingly complex and multifaceted accounts at the very same time.⁴

As we shall see, “active control,” this typically modernist hybrid idea, has fertilized a bundle of key concepts, like engagement, microtargeting, and experience marketing, that have been wandering all around the fifth estate. “Active control” has been a highly productive discursive trope—but also an epistemic failure. It is only by fully acknowledging the failure of this core idea that we can rethink the role of expert media interpreters in more realistic terms than their widely accepted professional image. Arguably, media experts have built mythical narratives about “active control” in order to veil the fact that they do not have in their hands either the adequate instruments of connecting/controlling people or the proof that “activity” (this highly modernist, polarizing concept) is indeed the central attribute of today’s audiences. (For detailed information supplementing the argument presented in this chapter, see online Appendix 4.)

5.1. Active Media-Using Prospects in Commercial Marketing

My first case study looks at a highly successful marketing textbook: Michael R. Solomon et al., *Consumer Behaviour: A European Perspective* (2002), which has claimed to provide the know-how of understanding

⁴ The notion of active control could never grow in expert discourse into a new pole that would be clearly distinguishable from old-fashioned binary concepts. On the contrary: the notion of “active control” has very efficiently fueled those good old practices (the recombination of binaries, nomadic expansion, schizophrenic narrative building, sponge theories) which, on the surface, have drawn the illusory aura of innovativeness around expert media interpreters—but which, in fact, have all worked on stabilizing and naturalizing the dominant taxonomic order of modernist media interpretation.

and commercially exploiting “consumer behavior” in the competitive, mediatized markets of late capitalist economy. Today, the textbook suggests, no commercial success is possible without carefully understanding the active identity-constructing practices in which media-immersed customers are enmeshed. This book exemplifies the perfect intermingling of popular media expertise and commercial marketing expertise on the grounds of neopopular discourse.

Solomon et al. (2002) have narrated their story of “active control” from the viewpoint of the consumer and the marketer equally. The most forceful instances where the consumer viewpoint is rhetorically constructed can be found in the short anecdotes by which the authors introduce each book chapter.⁵ In these stories, consumers appear as active meaning makers who are inevitably embedded in, and exposed to, the surrounding web of commodities, signs, media platforms, and advertisements. Exposed as they may be, however, the anecdotes suggest, they are not simply driven and manipulated: the consumer hero of Solomon et al. (2002) does not fall prey of the commodities she buys and the media she uses; on the contrary, she carefully finds for them a meaningful place in the personal life that she actively constructs for herself. Accordingly, today’s consumers, these active meaning-makers, would react extremely sensitively to repugnant messages that they feel challenge “their own” inner meanings and identifications. At the same time, they would also be highly responsive to texts that they feel enrich or affirm their ongoing identity choices. By cleverly understanding and enabling these identity-building practices, the anecdotes of Solomon et al. (2002) suggest, commercial firms may incite people to control and to enrich their own lives with the help of branded commodities.

For Margaret, the unthinkable was about to happen. Here she was with a big cigar in her mouth. A few short months ago, Margaret had believed that cigars were smoked by large, foul-

⁵ These short stories present snapshots taken from the daily consumption practices and media usages of invented persons. The mere fact that Solomon et al. (2002) prefer to evoke invented consumers instead of interviewing real ones illustrates well the flight into virtual reality that so much characterizes the work of professional media (and market) interpreters today.

smelling, older men. Lately, though, her attitudes had started to change. First, her friend Mary-Ann, returning from business trips to Stockholm and New York, reported that cigar-smoking among women was definitely more commonplace there than in Manchester. Then, she seemed to be reading more and more news stories about famous women lighting up. The clincher was coming across her heroine, supermodel Linda Evangelista, on the cover of *Cigar Aficionado*. Somehow, knowing that an elegant woman like Linda was a cigar fan put to rest any anxieties Margaret had about sacrificing her femininity if she took a puff now and then. Now, the signs were everywhere—women were shedding their disdain for smoke-filled rooms and flocking to cigar bars. The Consolidated Cigar Corporation picked up early on this trend and introduced its Cleopatra Collection, featuring versions of its cigars tapered at both ends to make it easier for women to light and hold in their mouths.

Apparently, many women have taken up cigar smoking as a way to navigate the "old boy network," and as a form of rebellion. That didn't worry Margaret, but she did find that she actually liked to relax after a good meal and savour the taste. Seemingly overnight, her beliefs about the unsavoury characteristics of cigar smokers had changed—and several of her friends admired her pluck for lighting up in public. She even went so far as to surf the net for more information about cigar products. She particularly liked the cigarwoman.com website, where she could access several cigar retailers, read about women's experiences, ideas and opinions regarding cigars, and even participate in a message board about attitudes of women who smoke cigars. (Solomon et al. 2002, 154)

The short morality play of Margaret enumerates all the mythical tropes of modernist analysis and exemplifies well the "speculative bubble" into which popular media experts have navigated themselves and their clients.

First, Margaret's story deploys the myth of popularity and the corresponding trope of "active connection." The fable constructs, in the first place, the popular power of the product—the cigar itself, a cultural artifact that is a hybrid compound of various layers of consumer expe-

rience: physical enjoyment, self-presentational aspirations, socializing, affective relations to celebrities, exposure to promotional content, and so on. The popularity of the cigar—its prodigious potential to arouse new feelings, convictions, interests, identifications, and practices in Margaret's life—could not work, of course, without that of those media texts which are enjoyable and powerful themselves, and help Margaret in fixing the meaning of cigar smoking in her life. The fable refers to five auratic media actors (outlets or people) which Margaret actively and self-consciously chooses to “connect” with. First, we learn that Margaret pays attention to news stories covering people like her own projected self, that is, cigar-smoking women. Second, we also learn that Margaret reads the magazine *Cigar Aficionado*. Third, Margaret is reported to be deeply moved by finding on the cover of this magazine her favorite celebrity, Linda Evangelista. (This encounter does really matter to Margaret, we learn.) Fourth, the story reports about Margaret's pleasurable experience of web surfing, her keenness to plunge into the website *cigarwoman.com*. Fifth, Margaret is reported to willfully express her opinion in response to an online questionnaire or interview. These five instances vividly exemplify the modernist imagination about the ways in which today's active audiences and the actors or platforms of popular media may “connect” with each other.

The second modernist myth, that of media normality, and the corresponding trope of “active control,” have also shaped Margaret's story. Indeed, the apparent, self-evident, all-too-plausible instances of “connection” have not only exemplified the sovereign activity of Margaret as a consumer and the complexity of her media environment and inner experiences. What Margaret's “connections” have also suggested for the reader is that she is not only an active consumer, but also a commercially exploitable one. The advertisements, media stories, webpages, and message boards that Margaret connects with, the fable suggests without saying, can all be organized together, as mutually reinforcing elements of a multiplatform marketing campaign, which creates a “360-degree brand experience.” It is not by mere coincidence, of course, that Margaret meets all these media images and experiences. The moral of the story is that due to their multiplatform presence, their nonintrusive advertising strategies and respect for Margaret, cigar companies may count on Margaret as a long-term, engaged, and self-controlled consumer. Thus, the “new rules of active

connection/control" do exist, they are apparent and intelligible, they can be used to the benefit of both producer and consumer. Popular media, in this mythical representation, constitute a "normal," rule-governed landscape.

The story about Margaret equally represents the third modernist myth: that of "transparent complexity." This myth suggests that the media field is composed of complex and contradictory elements, which, in spite of their divergence, can all be meaningfully arranged from an overall analytical viewpoint. This myth, as I have suggested earlier, is maintained by the discursive practice of "liquid binarizing." The very essence of this practice lies in redefining the meaning of key modernist concepts like persuasion or consumer sovereignty in a way that takes the edge of their contradictions (with each other and with the world), so they can be meaningfully placed into a relatively coherent overall horizon. It is in this spirit that Solomon et al. (2002) suggest, for example, that the Linda Evangelista cover does not incite in Margaret an addictive desire for smoking (as critical hardliners would put it), it merely "puts to rest" her anxieties about taking "a puff now and then." In this latter formulation, the moment of persuasion does not contradict the image of Margaret as a self-controlled consumer, and the two notions can be placed into a coherent narrative. By redefining modernist concepts in such a way, the analyst can escape from the challenge of facing and resolving their very contradictions—instead, she can confine herself to appeasing these incongruities and domesticating them into a common storyline. In this spirit, Margaret's flirt with cigars is presented to us as a complex story which is composed of various divergent elements; however, we may feel that it is also a meaningful one, something we are familiar with. In the end, following the author's steps, we can easily and self-evidently unravel the multiple threads that have led Margaret to become the cigar smoker who she is now: a smoker who is devoted and still, maintains a degree of self-control (e.g., stays away from "rebellious" or addictive cigar smoking), a prospect who is sovereign and still, persuadable, a customer who is casual and still, profitable. (For a summarizing table, see online Appendix 4.)

The complexity of "active" consumer and audience experience holds in itself, in this typically modernist narrative, the possibilities of increasing

sales and revenues, but also potential hurdles in the way of successful selling. The very ambiguities of audience-consumer activity, however, can be turned into commercial advantage with the contribution of competent marketers who know how people can be active and commercially exploited at the same time, with no contradictions.

The competent marketer would break with old-style, pushy promotional techniques in the same way as, Solomon et al. (2002) have argued, academic communication scholars have left behind the long-obsolete stimulus-response model of media effects. The emerging “interactionist” perspective in communication studies would seamlessly suit today’s marketing communication and the systemic realities of today’s individualized (“liquid”) late capitalist society.

[T]he interactionist perspective tones down the importance of the external stimuli, and views consumers as “interpreters,” wherein meaning does not arise from the objects themselves, nor from the psyche, but from interaction patterns. This view argues that meanings are not given “once and for all” and are not readily retrievable from memory. Rather, they are recreated and interpreted anew in each communicative action. Hence, the central role of the “communicating self” must be taken into consideration. The self is seen as an active participant in the creation of meaning from the various signs in the marketplace rather than as a passive decoder of meanings which may be inherent in the message. (Solomon et al. 2002, 170)

It is through such mythical arguments that Solomon et al. (2002) have tried to neutralize the inner controversies of their story. With the notion of “active meaning creation,” they have established a common ground for both consumer sovereignty and marketing-based promotional arousal, so the two could be presented as compatible with each other and their incongruences bracketed off. In this narrative, there are no implacable contradictions between audience activity and promotional effects, genuine needs and sales strategies, between contingency of meaning making and the predictability of sales effects. Consumer power and marketing power seamlessly find their natural place in the transparent, intelligible, harmonious universe that unfolds itself from the authors’ mythical perspective.

5.2. Controlling the Active Voter: Modernist Myths in the Discourse of Political PR

The book of Solomon et al. (2002) represents well the dominant storyline in today's commercial marketing narratives. The chief character in these narratives is the sovereign, self-controlling consumer. This truly modernist figure, since the very rise of marketing, has regularly been evoked by marketers who sought to legitimate themselves, their role as "persuaders," in the capitalist economy. It is only with the rise of the neopopular discourse, however, that the imaginary figure of the sovereign audience-consumer has assumed its key role in the professional identity of marketers. This identity has been constructed in various narratives about how today's marketers need to learn to understand and respect their media-using prospects, and how they need to reposition themselves as facilitators of mediated interaction and as cautious anthropologists, instead of being mere technicians of "selling soap."

In the related enterprise of PR and political campaigning, a very similar neopopular "mix" has been composed of the same tropes of media campaigns, persuasion, and audience (inter)activity. However, the elements of the complex have been weighed and balanced differently, following the specific stakes of the PR industry. At their origins, commercial marketing and PR have offered different techniques to reach—or "connect"—their target audiences. While commercial marketing has offered market research technologies as the basis of strategic communication, PR and political campaign experts have laid more focus on procedures of media management and organization building. Some of these differences still stand today. Marketers typically understand their profession as a deep and ethical facilitation that channels media-driven consumer "demand" into the capitalist economy. By contrast, PR experts have stressed their expertise in running efficient media campaigns and building powerful campaign organizations. The professional self-image of marketing experts, often evoking the aesthetic genre of testimony, has presented plausible stories about how today's self-controlled, self-developing consumers would cooperate with branded commodities and their producers, to the benefit of both parts, with the help of marketing. By contrast, experts of PR and political campaigning have played with the aesthetics of the machine, of the well-lubricated

engine, in order to illustrate their ability to put today's abundant media platforms to the service of their clients.

It would be a mistake, however, to overstress the differences between the two subfields of the fifth estate. Commercial marketing and PR today arguably represent two fractions of the same neopopular discourse. This is not only because their techniques—consumer research and media management—have started to merge with the rise of interactive new media. More important is the fact that the apparatuses of marketing and PR, however different the techniques and concepts they may use, have worked on the very same project: on demonstrating that even in today's turbulent media environment, it is possible to run persuasive media campaigns. Indeed, it has been a vital interest of all professional media interpreters to prove that today's active audiences' newly acquired power to vindicate their preferences as they like does not undermine the efficiency of strategic communication, and today's chaotic tendencies render marketing and PR expertise indispensable, and not obsolete. Marketing and PR experts have presented their role in highly similar terms: they have appeared as ethical facilitators of interaction and as efficient communication strategists at the same time.

PR experts have developed a specific imagery to justify their professional ability to "connect and control the active audience." The "active" audience that PR experts have promised to connect and control has been presented as a multitude of highly elusive, attention-scarce, distrustful, promotion-savvy and multitasking media users. The trope of "active control" has been just as important in the neopopular discourse of PR as in that of marketing.⁶

⁶ However, it is reasonable to argue that the new, "neopopular" discourses and practices of PR did not do more than retailoring the old practices of persuasion and propaganda in new forms without much change in the substance. To illustrate how the rhetorics of success and efficiency have penetrated all the discourse of PR, I would evoke here the subtitles of papers written by PR practitioners, collected in the book *Public Relations in Practice: A Casebook* (Moss 1990). As the book editor has pointed out in the introduction, the book's primary goal has been to change the negative image of PR as manipulation and to unravel its "true nature and value" (2). As Danny Moss has argued: "While it is important not to belittle the very real importance of effective communication and presentation skills, the preoccupation with

The case study of this section comes from the American science and technology magazine *Wired*.⁷ The article in question, entitled "Obama's Secret Weapons: Internet, Databases and Psychology" (Stirland 2008), presents the sophisticated machinery of Barack Obama's presidential campaign. The article suggests that Obama's campaign staff developed groundbreaking and innovative techniques of campaign mobilization. These techniques, *Wired* author Sarah Lai Stirland suggests, consisted in a clever combination of various media and volunteer resources into a professional, multilayered machine. The interpretation of the Obama campaign may not be unfamiliar for the informed reader: indeed, Stirland's account evokes what some professional marketers would call a "multiplatform" campaign or what academics would denote with the term of "convergent" media culture (Jenkins 2006). As the *Wired* article reports to us, the Obama campaign has successfully combined at least three interrelated layers: first, Obama could afford

this single aspect of work should not be allowed to detract from the important strategic role that a well-executed public relations program can play in supporting the activities of many organizations." Although the possibility of this broader, enabling role of PR has been brought up by several authors, the majority of the papers, in the end, did not do more than presenting a case study in successful image and media management. This is why the metaphors of effective communication, strategizing, and media war could be so dominant in the papers' subtitles:

"A Study of the Impact and Process of Changing the Corporate Identity of a Major National Charity Organization"

"An Examination of an Effective Industrial and Political Lobbying Campaign against the Monopoly Supplier of Gas Fuel in the UK"

"An Examination of Handling of a Potential Crisis Arising out of the Rapid Escalation of an External Environmental Issue Affecting a Major Chemical Company"

"A Study in Handling a Financial Crisis and the Role Played by Public Relations in Restoring Confidence in a Company Following Its Fall from Favour in the City"

⁷ Indeed, journalists from outside the PR industry are perfectly able to reproduce its main narratives and its "modernist" discursive tropes—which observation may justify my earlier point that the sphere of media interpretation cannot be confined to its core industries, for it also comprises peripheral fields like journalism, blogging or academia. Accordingly, the "fifth estate" can best be defined by the common modernist discourse that its various, central and peripheral, apparatuses commonly cultivate.

to buy himself a strong presence in mass media; second, his campaign staff cleverly used the Internet to organize volunteers, mobilize grass-roots activist groups, and integrate them into the campaign; third, the Obama staff used the Internet to allocate (locally collected) knowledge about individual voters and to disseminate this knowledge among local activists making phone calls and canvassing door to door. This story, a perfect PR variant of neopopular mythmaking, applies all three basic discursive tropes of modernist media interpretation. (For a summarizing table, see online Appendix 4.)

The “active audience” does not appear as a prime figure in the article, still, it is a key background assumption that shapes the PR-inspired narrative of the *Wired* article. This is because, seen from a PR point of view, the chances of “popular connection” are less to be read out from a thorough consumer anthropology than the buildup of an effective campaign organization. However, we may find several implicit references to the alleged behavior of the audience that campaigners need to connect with. To “connect,” from a PR point of view, means two things: to appeal to voters’ minds and hearts, of course, but also, and in the first place, simply to find them and to get their attention. As a PR agency has recently put it in a press release, “the first step in engagement is being found” (PR Newswire 2012). It is in the very same spirit that the *Wired* article has constructed the trope of “active connection,” by combining two imaginary figures: that of the elusive media user who cannot be reached any longer through mass media channels and that of the honest and helpless voter who awaits the voice that inspires her.

The mythical trope of “connecting rules” is embodied, in the narrative of PR, by the straightforward image of the campaign machine that allocates the dispersed attention of potential voters. The *Wired* article suggested in 2008 that if Obama beats John McCain, it would be less to do with the higher appeal of his message than with the more efficient techniques of carrying this message to voters. Seen from a PR perspective, it is by professionally organizing a soldierly mass of activists that the hunt for voters can persist in intensity and efficiency. Behind this diagnosis there lurks the implicit understanding that in today’s media age, when the messages developed in the campaign center cannot be delivered through vertical media channels, the horizontal and direct

interventions of a pertinent cohort of ground soldiers are quintessential. Accordingly, the most important rule of "connection," seen from the PR viewpoint, means to operate, as smoothly and effectively as possible, a campaign machine that identifies and finds persuadable voters in today's cluttered, multimedia environment. In order to achieve this, the article reports, the campaign's local activist teams

have both phone-banked and physically knocked on doors to make sure that voters are registered and know where to vote—an effort that will continue all the way through Election Day. . . . "The last weekend before the election, they're going to have constant phone-banking and canvassing, asking people whether they've voted yet, and if not, when they're going to vote," says Scanlon, discussing plans laid out by four team leaders at a local Plant City campaign office. But the calling won't be a completely random affair. The Obama campaign will give volunteers access to databases that have been constantly updated throughout the summer through its field-office computers, and through myBo—Obama supporters' nickname for myBarackObama.com—with information about potential voters' political leanings. The information in the database has accumulated over time from previous election campaigns, and is constantly updated with information gathered at people's doorsteps by canvassers like Scanlon, and through phone calls. Now, someone identified as a supporter is likely to be called again by the Obama campaign, and reminded where to go vote; people identified as "undecided" in the database may receive a call or a personal visit from a volunteer to find out how they can still be persuaded, or they may be mailed some information about Obama's positions on the issues. (Stirland 2008)

Of course, the "rules of active control" cannot be confined to campaign management even from a PR perspective. Connecting the active audience is also a matter of engagement, affect, and imagination. First of all, it is important to keep campaign activists themselves engaged and well-informed. To connect voters, campaign headquarters need to connect activists first. Interestingly, the ways in which campaign headquarters should engage and enable local activists have been portrayed

very similarly to the ways in which popular media has been suggested to engage (“connect”) fans by marketing experts and media scholars.⁸

Meanwhile, of course, even from such a PR-based viewpoint as the *Wired* article, it goes without saying that not only the local activists have to be “connected” and engaged by the headquarters: activists themselves need to “connect”—enchant, attract—potential voters. As most modernist interpreters, Stirland presents the rules of engagement as apparent and easy to understand. These clean-cut rules of “connection” were taught, we learn from the article, to the masses of volunteers who participated at the so-called “leadership trainings” of the Obama Camp (23,000 activists receiving more than eight hours of training). Marshall Ganz, Harvard professor and Obama campaign strategist, presented the training system and the connection rules in the following way:

[The] training system works well for the Obama campaign, because it’s designed to channel the enthusiasm of voters who are emotionally inspired by orators such as Obama. This appeal to the right brain contrasts with most of the recent Democratic political campaigns, which have appealed to voters’ logic by selling concepts and policies. . . . In addition to leadership and motivation

⁸ For example, the article reports that in the Obama campaign, a specific incentive model has been applied to urged activist teams “to find out more about one another’s experiences, and draw on each member’s expertise. The model also uses personal storytelling during workshops as a way to motivate peers and potential recruits to action.” In another section, the article suggests, in a manner that would be highly familiar to either academic or user discourses about “new media,” the following: “[T]he campaign also seems to recognize that some volunteers won’t cotton to a top-down system, and its web tools accommodate independent efforts. Scanlon started her work for Obama with the South Tampa team, but felt the campaign wasn’t sending enough volunteers to canvas her hometown Plant City, a working-class suburb that voted for Bush in the last two presidential elections. Obama’s organizers insisted that that they needed to focus their efforts on more densely populated surrounding areas. ‘I just didn’t feel good about that,’ she says. So Scanlon took matters in her own hands by tapping into the campaign’s online Neighbor-to-Neighbor tool on myBo. In two days last September, she knocked on fifty doors to sniff out support for Obama, entering her neighbors’ responses into the campaign’s databases through myBo.”

training, the camp features storytelling sessions, where the volunteers are broken up into small teams organized by congressional district. Each member of these groups is asked to tell personal stories in two minutes, in the same format Obama used in his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention. "Ultimately, your story should move people to specific action by painting a detailed picture of how things might be different if we act, giving us hope that if we act now we can make real that different future," explains the training manual. . . . "What we've been doing is trying to teach people to do what Obama does during his speeches—to tell their own stories to motivate others. . . . You're building this sense of commitment to both the values and people, but you're structuring it purposefully to achieve goals like, 'In this district, we need 2000 votes.'" (Stirland 2008)

My final point about the *Wired* article is that it constructs a coherent narrative out of the incongruent information pieces, and, thus, performs the modernist myth of "transparent complexity." This myth suggests that however deep ambiguities and contradictions can be observed at the analyzed field, they can all be meaningfully arranged from a coherent overall perspective. The article's overall master narrative has been meant to ensure that the reader, in the end, will see the Obama campaign machine as an important achievement that may reinvigorate a healthy democracy fueled by civic participation. A PR campaign, in this view, is not a machine of "total administration" that would build from Obama a living sculpture in the style of Lenin's "monumental propaganda." The article's master narrative has been established by the flexible recombination and redefinition of binaries. Accordingly, activists have been presented equally as docile soldiers in the campaign war and as self-determined, responsible individuals trying to build a better country. In the same spirit, the author blended the poles of propaganda and authenticity, by describing how well propagated the program of Obama was, and also allowing a local activist to express her view that Obama's tax plan was better than McCain's "for 100 percent of the voters I spoke to in Plant City." The meaningful mixture of political mobilization and democratic engagement, artificial form and authentic substance, nicely finds its expression in the following excerpt, from the closing section of the *Wired* article:

“I will just say that they’ve done a great job reaching out to young people,” says 20-year-old Justin York, Central Florida chairman of Students for McCain. “I do have a lot of respect for whoever cooked up their operation, because it’s an impressive machine that they have built among young people. . . . We don’t have anything nearly as advanced as the Obama campaign.” (Stirland 2008)

Performing a typically modernist PR narrative, the *Wired* article has meant to render equally palpable the power, the sophistication, and the democratic potential of the Obama campaign machine. Issues of propaganda and democratic emancipation have equally been made visible and the possible contradictions between the two have been neutralized. Placing both antagonistic poles into a common, meaningful narrative, the journalist could celebrate the power of democracy and that of the persuasion industry at the very same time.

5.3. The Popular Middle: The Mythical Object of Active Control in Political Marketing

Gluing the antagonistic tropes of genuine empowerment and effective propaganda into a coherent mythical narrative, political marketing has been a most typical emanation of the fifth estate’s modernist discourse. According to its self-understanding, the field of political marketing has taken over a key representational function from the now the defunct institutions of representative democracy. With the decline of parties with mass membership, political marketers like to argue, have gone the large nationwide political infrastructures that so far had effectively channeled the popular will into the state. Seen from this view, political marketing creates a new, alternative infrastructure of political representation, with a far higher potential to channel voters’ expectations into the political system. According to its self-understanding, political marketing enables the politician to “get in touch” again with the people, it urges the politician to listen to the people’s voice, and it rewards the best listener with political power. Popular agency and political power never conflict in the mythical image that political marketing experts draw about today’s politics.

Political marketers promote themselves as mediating agents "connecting" the political realm with today's popular electorates that have freed themselves from the conventional loyalties binding them to political parties. Today's popular electorate is depicted in marketing discourse as an "active" audience, a conglomerate of free-floating, disloyal individuals who follow their own compass in making their political choices. The image of the voter corresponds greatly to the figure of the sovereign consumer we know from commercial marketing handbooks. Following this correspondence to its logical end point, political marketers have established a structural analogy between politically representing the will of the popular electorate and gratifying consumer "demand" at commercial markets. The metaphor of the "political market" has become a common reference point in the professional interpretation of mediatized politics, as well. Commercialized popular media being the self-evident realm for political competition to take place, it is inevitable that references to the mediatization, marketization, and professionalization of politics have blended inextricably in the discourse of political marketing. (This applies to commercial marketing, as well. It is not by coincidence that a commercial marketing textbook like that of Solomon et al. [2002] looks like an overall introduction into popular media studies.)

The image of political marketing—as an infrastructure of representation and will-formation at mediatized political markets—has been closely tied to the mythical figure of "the people": the alienated and disloyal middle ground, waiting for a true representative, being no more anchored to old mass parties and to peer groups with unquestionable ideological commitments. People in the middle, according to the dominant view, are less conditioned by ideology than a new, "pick and choose" political culture (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999, 224) that urges them to continuously monitor the ever-changing supply of politics and to engage with the actual "product" they find the most appealing, reasonable, or innovative. Political marketing, from the beginning, has depicted itself as the art of "connecting" and "controlling" the elusive conglomerate of uncommitted, middle-ground voters.

The very idea seeing the "elusive middle" as the decisive terrain of political competition is certainly not new. Its prime antecedent is to be found in the much referred to Hotelling's law, predicting that actors of oligopolistic markets will try to eliminate (rather than stress) their dif-

ferences and to conquer the center ground with the exact same, “lowest common denominator” products. The law of oligopolistic competition has been famously actualized to politics by Anthony Downs (1957), arguing that moving to the “center ground” is the only rational strategy to follow for mainstream parties in oligopolistic, (quasi-)two-party systems. Downs’s argument has been only one among the many formulations of the key background idea that conquering “the middle” is the key to political power. This idea, indeed, has become an overall maxim in the last decades’ marketized/mediatized politics. Among the many rival theories of political marketing, Dominic Wring argues in his state of the art review: “[T]he ‘center ground’ thesis . . . is the most common one and continues to condition a great deal of contemporary electoral discourse. Consequently, when faced with defeat, Labour and Conservative leaders often are advised to court the center, squeeze the Liberal vote, or appeal to middle England/class/income voters” (1999, 42–3).

In mainstream narratives about mediatized politics, political marketing has been presented as the art of “connecting/controlling” the active and elusive middle ground. This mythical image has been constructed by political marketers themselves who have sought to establish the legitimacy of their profession. The mythical idea of conquering and holding “the center” has been established with the help of the same modernist discursive practices that I have presented in relation to the other subfields of the fifth estate. First, political marketers have envisioned that, in the middle ground of politics and society, a new electorate is rising, an active audience that “connects” in new—more active, less loyal, less predictable—ways with the sphere of politics. Second, the discourse of marketing has promised that these new connections are profitable for politicians, who can control their active electorate if they follow the new, marketing-based techniques of connection making (which, of course, marketers would have a privileged access to). Third, political marketers have used the means of “liquid binarizing” in order to mythically appease the contradictions between the accounts they gave about the persuasive power of their industry and about the sovereignty of empowered popular electorates. This appeasing has meant to argue that today’s marketized-mediatized politics urges people to develop new, “active” political loyalties that would allow them to attach themselves to a party without giving up their sovereign ability to recognize and express their own genuine interests.

In political marketing literature—from the practitioner to the academic wing—we may find the same historical narrative to circulate incessantly. With this typically modernist narrative (which overlaps greatly with Giddens's "disembedding" theory [1995]), marketing experts have established a common ground on which to interpret the recent transformations of the political system in late modern democracies. In the last three decades, marketing professionals have suggested, voters have become more self-driven, more reflexive, and more informed in their political judgment. In consequence, the story goes, people have distanced themselves from political parties, and they have developed a cynical attitude toward all public actors claiming to "genuinely" represent their will. Voters have increasingly refused to occupy the place in the political field that so far has been self-evidently assigned to them by their class membership or religious affiliations. Instead, voters have learned how to use for their own purposes the great array of available information available in the realm of popular media.

The disembedding of political identities, marketers have argued, has been conditioned by broader structural transformations in the socioeconomic environment of democratic politics. Among these oft-referred transformations, it is worth evoking here (1) the societal transition from high to late modernity (people become more affluent, more educated, more mobile, more leisure-oriented, less attached to patriarchal family structures [Lees-Marshment 2001, 17–18]); (2) the increasing commercialization of social life (the logic of capitalist competition takes over all kinds of social fields, including politics [Wring 1999, 41]); (3) the emancipation of popular media (the press itself becomes more "educated and experienced" [Newman 1994, 30–31], popular media free themselves from their subordination to the state, the state-defined political agenda collapses with the weakening of public service media hegemony); and (4) the professionalization of campaigning (the logic of competition pushes actors to run more effective, better-organized, highly expensive campaigns [Newman 1994, 26–27]).

Looking at all the layers, it would be hard, indeed, to miss the very extent to which the key binaries of modernist discourse have shaped the worldview of political marketers. As an integral part of the modernist discourse, marketing literature has contrasted today's late modern,

postindustrial society to its high modern, industrial predecessor with the exact same binaries that conventionally had been used to distinguish industrial modernity from feudal premodernity. Envisioning a transition from ascribed to achieved identities, from collective to individual life trajectories, from loyalty to reflexivity (and so on), political marketing has been a prime emanation of today's "neomodern" (see Alexander 2003a) intellectual discourse. As other "neomodern" protagonists, marketers have poured huge energies into applying, in a somewhat refashioned form, the century-old image of the modern individual to the late modern voter who, according to this mythical narrative, would emancipate herself from the traditional loyalty structures inherited from high modernity.⁹

The imagined "people" of late modernity have been assigned by marketers with a similar teleological role as the one that had been attributed to the "working class" in the high modern era. In a similar way as the proletariat in socialist theory, the figure of the middle-ground, disembedded, volatile citizen has been used in marketing theory to impersonate the "popular class" that theorists have claimed to represent. Accordingly, today's popular class no longer consists of physical workers. The "old" working class, marketers have argued, has ceased to be the driving force of popular classes (in Britain, the proportion of people identifying themselves as working class has fallen from 74 percent to 28 percent between 1964 and 1992 [Lees-Marshment 2001, 17]). Today's popular class is a less well-organized, less self-conscious conglomerate of middle-ground voter-consumers waiting for true political representation. Thus, the late modern "people" needs to be emancipated (again)—and political marketing defines itself as the major force of this emancipatory project.

The popular media-using, middle-ground citizen, according to marketers, has relatively stable policy preferences but is not sure which political force could represent them the best. Thus, people belonging to the middle-ground majority are enmeshed in an ephemeral play of political identification that is moved by the multiple, ambivalent infor-

⁹ All this represents the overall dialectic of modernist discourse which constantly makes its actors denounce, as Ágnes Heller once argued, the actual present or half-past of modernity as "premodern" in the name of a hoped-for future that would accomplish the real potential of modernity.

mation flowing from popular media. The selective, disloyal, elusive citizens of the unfaithful majority, marketers have suggested, develop new strategies of "connecting" with politicians. They would monitor—similarly to consumers of commercial goods—the actual supply of the political market and engage with the actor they feel to convincingly connect their private needs and expectations with a broader, communal vision about the public good.

The literature of political marketing (and mediatized politics) may well be seen as an immense repository of apparent success stories in which middle-ground, popular media-consuming audiences would enthusiastically "connect" with political actors whose offer genuinely "resonates" with their affinities. The heroes of the political marketing literature are political figures whose legacy lies in their ability to connect the active, selective, elusive middle ground, "the popular class" of late modern society.

Bill Clinton is a typical example of the mainstream marketing narrative. Accordingly, Clinton's power as political leader has stemmed from his ability to establish resonant connections with people: "Clinton gave people what they wanted to hear, with just the right language, words and phrases that would resonate with the American public" (Johnson 1997; quoted in O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2002, xii). Clinton's "people" have always been the middle-class majority of American society.¹⁰ In marketing literature, there is a wide consensus that it is due to his appeal to middle-ground America that Clinton could become a decisive figure of late-twentieth-century American history. Clinton has famously established his leadership of the popular middle in his speech at the Democratic Convention in the 1992 presidential campaign, which remains one of the most referred to instances of marketized/mediatized politics. Clinton's speech at the convention boosted his popularity by 15 to 20 percent and secured his way to the final victory in November 1992. Marketing expert Bruce Newman explains this huge success with Clinton's appeal to the middle ground: "Throughout the Convention, Clinton continued

¹⁰ As the former president himself expressed it in a campaign event: "President Obama has a plan to rebuild America from the ground up," Clinton says. "It only works if there is a strong middle class. That's what happened when I was President" (Lizza 2012).

to talk about the middle class and the need to rescue ordinary people from the ravages of the economy. In effect, Clinton successfully positioned himself as a person who came from a very ordinary background and could relate to the hardship that average, middle-class citizens were experiencing" (Newman 1994, 97).

Tony Blair and the creators of New Labour have been interpreted in marketing literature in the same terms as Clinton: as actors embodying the genuine hopes and needs of the popular middle ground. It might be enough here to follow marketing expert Jennifer Lees-Marshment in her reconstruction of the New Labour story. As Lees-Marshment argues, Blair was doomed to success from the beginning in the popular middle: "[H]e was a family-man, centre-left and media friendly. As such he appealed to those voters the party needed to attract to win the next election" (2001, 184). These abilities have allowed him and his New Labour to gain "the support of voters in what Blair himself called 'middle income, middle Britain'" (192). The fact that Blair and his group built their strategy on attracting the popular middle ground could hardly be questioned. This devotion with the popular middle-led New Labour think tanks to commission detailed surveys, with the aim of deploying the wishes of "'swing' voters who had voted Tory despite being traditional supporters of Labour" (182). The middle-ground orientation was no less apparent throughout the phase of "product development," the positioning of Blair as a centrist, "third way" politician. Following survey and focus group hints about the wishes of middle Britain, Blair adopted a centrist position with regard to various policy issues. He "abandoned the unpopular call for higher income tax, abandoned plans to re-nationalize privatized industries, took a much more pro-business attitude, began to talk about reforming the welfare state instead of expanding it, and became tougher on crime" (186). As a glorious celebration of a new alliance with "middle Britain," Blair signed his famous "contract with the people" in the campaign of 1997.

Just like Clinton or Blair, all the famous protagonists of marketized/mediatized politics have owed their fame to their alleged appeal to the "center ground." In Germany, Gerhard Schröder has famously repositioned SPD as the representative of the "Neue Mitte," the "new center" of German society. In a similar vein, Silvio Berlusconi approached Italians with his party, Forza Italia, which he promoted

as giving voice to the majority of disappointed citizens who were “dis-oriented, political orphans and who risk(ed) being unrepresented” (Ladraa 2015).

To sum up, just like in the other subfields of the “fifth estate” that I have reviewed so far, the tropes of effective persuasion and democratic emancipation have been inextricably fused in the discourse of political marketing. This is especially true to the marketing ideas about the “popular middle”—the members of which are active, elusive, disloyal, and open to the appeal of marketing-based campaigns at the very same time. (For a summarizing table, see online Appendix 4.)

Part 3.

*The Counterperformativity of
Neopopular Mythmaking*

Introduction to Part 3

In Part 2, I have explored the cultural autonomy of collective mythmaking on popular media. I have presented how the modernist, neopopular discourse on media and politics is propelled by the inner dynamics of its binary oppositions, and how it allows its protagonists to pump their narratives into oversophisticated and desperately unfalsifiable mythical explanations. In Part 3, I will show how this blind and self-propelled process of mythical bubble-inflating silences parts of the reality it tries to make sense of and how it creates a new reality that is much more chaotic than what it forecasts. To address the “counter-performativity” of neopopular mythmaking, I will turn to a case study from Hungary, a country where the processes of “mediatization” have been played out at an extremely aggressive pace. To place the case study in context, I will address the problem of postcommunist media and political transition from the point of view of the “speculative” approach developed in this book.

The argument developed so far allows me to rethink the recent transformations of the media system in postcommunist Europe. It is telling that scholarly research on the region has grasped these complex transformations by the term “media transition,” which suggests, in a functionalist spirit, a linear (although not necessarily fast or straightforward) “adaptation” of Western regulatory models and popular media institutions (Jakubowicz 2003). Most importantly, the

“adaptation” narrative of the transition of Eastern European media has closely mirrored Western narratives about Western media change and mediatization. Western accounts of “mediatization” and Eastern accounts of “media transition” have equally revolved around the idea of media “adapting” themselves to a popular/commercialized/spectacular model and politics being “adapted” to this new media model. Seen from this shared perspective, market-driven popular media has been grasped as a system transferred globally from the United States to both the Western center and the Eastern periphery of Europe. Researchers of Western and Eastern media have shared the view that the national adoption of new institutions of media production and distribution sets the new frames in which politics operates in the nation-state. However, there are good reasons to suspect that Eastern media transition theories have made part of the modernist mythicization of popular media just as much as the Western theories that they “imitated” (to use the vocabulary of this book’s “speculative” approach) and applied to the local context of postcommunist media transformation.

This book reads media transition in Eastern Europe and Hungary as the importation of a speculative media system, in other words, the parallel transfer of media institutions and genres and regulatory models on the one hand, and of the neopopular discourse which provides actors with plausible representations on the newly adopted media system, on the other hand. In fact, the import was not even simultaneous: interpretive narratives explaining how popular media works appeared years earlier in Hungary than the commercial television channels themselves (in 1997, two national commercial channels got broadcasting rights). (In a similar way, the new media prophecies by Nicolas Negroponte and others in the 1990s were generally known in Hungarian expert circles in the years when the Internet had been practically absent in Hungary.) In Hungary, the “import” of the commercial media system or new media technology has been preceded by the adoption of interpretive narratives, which inevitably prefigured the “new rules” of the soon-to-be-imported system and the appropriate strategies of survival in the new system. This may rightly raise concerns that the neopopular discourse has defined for actors the set of imaginable rules, effects, and usages of commercial media well before the first pro-

grams of private TV channels were aired from the newly built studios in 1997.¹

The “double import” has made it difficult for Hungarian observers to make sense of the freshly installed, popular media system in any “organic,” independent way, without heavily relying on the legitimate representations of popular media transferred from West to East. There are good reasons to suspect that the media-interpreting discourse transferred from the West has heavily prestructured the expert, political, and scholarly understandings of commercial media in Hungary. The dominant tropes of media interpretation have quickly become key orienting anchors, which directly drove the adaptive strategies of political and media actors and also shaped the ways scholars and intellectuals have reflected on the “adaptation.”

To understand the discursive import, it is worth to consider how closely Hungarian observers’ opinions about commercial media in the 1990s corresponded with the two normative narratives dominating Western scholarly research (and the “fifth estate” in general).

¹ These concerns may rightly incite the well-known postcolonialist criticism that again, to use an old bon mot, (peripheral) life imitates (central) art. Indeed, adding another layer of meaning to what Homi K. Bhabha has called “colonial mimicry” (1994), the present and future history of peripheries seems to simply follow the path preimagined by central others (who may not even intended to analyze peripheral life itself, just prepared the schemes that, at a later point, would happen to “naturally” give meaning to peripheral life).

In a remarkable passage, Lawrence Grossberg tells a similar story about how a local museum project in Canada has been exposed to readymade scholarly interpretations “imported” to the local field. At the opening conference of the museum, most papers explored its dominant cultural logic, and they “were all predictably critical of the capitalist, imperialistic, Eurocentric, ethnocentric, racist, sexist biases . . . [and] demanded that, in one way or another, the entire project be dismantled or turned over to ‘the people’ on behalf of whom the various critics were all sure they could speak. . . . An occasional critic rejected the elitist and self-righteous tone of the majority, opting instead to defend the pleasures the ordinary people could and would find in the museum. . . . In each case, the politics of the museum seem to be given well before any real analysis” (Grossberg 1992, 91–92). Grossberg’s objections may shed light to the ambiguous truth claims of dominant interpretive narratives which usually tend to preframe the observed reality instead of respecting the empirical heterogeneity of their subject.

In the mid-1990s, Hungarian media experts developed—together with political actors, European bureaucrats, media personalities, and media entrepreneurs—convincing arguments about the expectable benefits of a competitive, deregulated media system that would eliminate public service media monopoly. The market-driven media system was expected by most actors to liberate the audience from the cage of Soviet-type, government-driven state television.² In this context, ideas of market liberalization and commercial media had been placed into a narrative of democratization (“giving the people what the people wants,” “let the people decide what they watch”). However, very shortly after the launch of commercial channels in 1997, the hopes about people’s choice turned into resentment, a bitter feeling that “this is not what we have been fighting for.” Suddenly, a new, critical narrative took the place of the positive reading. The presumed ability of commercial media to directly gratify people’s needs had been reinterpreted as a burden to democratic culture, as a corrosive force gravitating toward the lowest standards, as a mechanism that needs to be constrained in the name of higher democratic values. The presence of elaborate utopian and dystopian narratives in Hungary in the 1990s suggests that these narratives were borrowed from Western, “ready-to-apply” interpretations, rather than emerging organically from local reflection (either in-depth retrospective analysis or practical knowledge based on trial and error).³

² It is true that since the democratic transition in 1989 in Hungary, the state’s television channels have not had much to do with the idea of public service. Democratically elected governments inherited the state’s TV company from state socialism and used it with the same propagandistic intentions as their Communist predecessors. The “Soviet” model of state-driven television had survived democratic transition: as it has been widely documented, freely elected governments did not give up control over public service television (Sükösd and Bajomi-Lázár 2003).

³ Hungarian professionals—in politics, media, and the fifth estate—have quickly learned to operate the modernist tropes of neopopular media interpretation. For example, when the right-wing party Fidesz introduced new communication strategies with the help of paid professionals around 1998, left-leaning journalists and intellectuals launched a crusade against government propaganda: their dismissal of spin, marketing, and the “permanent campaign” filled the media. These controversies gave birth to narratives and myths very similar to the ones populating public debates in Britain during

If we acknowledge the structuring role that the imported neopopular discourse has played in Eastern Europe, the commonly alleged “adaptation” of local media and political system to a globally imported model gains a very different meaning. Seen from the mainstream approach, this adaptation process reads as the (gradual) imposition of the same uniform system of market-driven media and media-driven politics. As a leading academic expert of Eastern European media systems has argued, media transition in the region has brought a system which is

business as usual in the sense that the media are shaped by the market, and it is increasingly the media that control the politicians rather the other way around. And everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe, it is business as usual, because so far the region has not really been able to develop any new, original patterns of media operation that go beyond what we know from elsewhere. (see Jakubowicz 2003)

However, it could be asked from an alternative viewpoint, What if the uniformity signals the collective acceptance of the same neopopular ideas about how popular media does and should work? What if the author’s recognition of the same structural patterns here and elsewhere reflects an inflexible acceptance of neopopular interpretive patterns that impose a uniform viewpoint on observers just as much as media institutions would impose (as modernist critics like to argue) a uniform logic on social actors? What if our media and political systems have been adapted to collective myths about the “usual business” of popular media?

Importantly, my argument is not about adaptation in itself. There is no doubt that the process of “adaptation” of Hungarian politics to

the rise of Tony Blair and New Labour in the late 1990s. What else, if not this overlap, could prove the fact that globally dominant interpretive narratives have been imported into Hungary? Indeed, it seems that Hungarian observers around 2000 simply and (seemingly) unknowingly “reinvented the wheel” of popular media critique: they apparently reproduced the exact imagery that had been invented in America and Britain a few years earlier. Accordingly, Hungarian intellectuals reinvented the image of spin as an irresistible machine and the menacing figure of the spin doctor, the “grey cardinal” who pulls the strings from the background.

popular media had been played out as intensely as imaginable. There are good reasons to argue, also, that Hungary's spectacular and disheartening slide back (from a position of regional front-runner to that of the "sick man" of Eastern Europe) originated to a great extent in the breakdown of the democratic political process in the context of politics' "mediatization." The catastrophic crisis of Hungarian politics in the 2000s was closely related to the emergence of a new, commercialized media environment in the late 1990s. Since media liberalization in 1997, political actors and journalists felt that the popular loyalties they had enjoyed so far could only be maintained by adopting the professional, "popular" communication techniques required by the commercial media system. In the 1998 parliamentary election campaign, observers warned that politics' center of gravity was shifting toward media appearance, spectacular address, style, personality, and promotional propaganda. In the following years, the process accelerated further and reached a level of "overadaptation," where politicians strived for maximally exploiting the supposed "logic" of commercial media, with no worries at all about the potential backlash that such an outburst of populism, sensationalism, and spin may bring to the democratic political system.

However, the mere existence of adaptation does not tell much about its object, the very "thing" that politics has been adapting to. Have politicians adapted themselves to media logic "as it is"? Can the trajectory of Hungarian politics be claimed, without serious oversimplification, to follow that apparent end? Is the mediatization of politics, intense as it may be, a response to the apparent, external, systemic conditions of market-driven popular media?

The definitive factor transforming Hungarian politics in my view was not the objective imperatives of the newly implemented media system, but the unquestioned adoption of the neopopular discourse that gave meaning to the new media system immediately, well before local actors could have understood it on their own. Since media liberalization "in East-Central Europe took place in relatively quickly and unexpectedly and not as a result of a slow organic process" (Bajomi-Lázár 2009), Hungarian public actors—politicians, journalists, intellectuals—had no time to "appropriate" the new, mediatized environment of politics. They had no time to accumulate experience, to experiment on what is and what is not doable, to lean on trial-and-error heuristics,

to develop a “*sense pratique*” (Bourdieu 1992) that would instinctively orient them in the transformed political system. Instead, they took the freshly imported interpretive narratives about the popular media system for granted. If they appropriated a “logic,” this has not been a “media logic” but the “discursive logic” of the “West-approved” neopopular discourse that they trusted to reliably uncover the “new rules” of political communication.

To illustrate how the neopopular interpretive tropes have shaped the narratives of Hungarian media and marketing professionals, I will compare texts taken from two important figures of the “fifth estate” in Hungary (see the end of this chapter). One of them is marketing strategist András Wermer, the Hungarian “grey cardinal,” the alter ego of Alastair Campbell, who had a key orchestrating role in the political performance in 2001–2 that will be analyzed below. The other expert is media scholar Péter Bajomi-Lázár, a leading figure of academic media studies in Hungary. Both professionals have developed sophisticated views about the recent transformations of mediatized/marketized politics. (To reconstruct these views, I have turned to a scholarly paper from Bajomi-Lázár [2009] and a set of interviews Wermer gave in the mid-2000s [Spirk 2005].) Bajomi-Lázár and Wermer are very different figures, holding different views, and are placed at a maximally distant position inside the fifth estate. However, in spite of their differences, they work with the same mythical tropes of the common modernist discourse that unites most professionals in the media-interpreting sphere.

The two experts start from a similar diagnosis. Bajomi-Lázár argues that a “paradigm change” took place in Hungarian and Eastern European political communication. In a similar vein, Wermer thinks of political marketing as a truly new way of thinking about politics. According to Bajomi-Lázár, the paradigm change took place because the media systems have been liberalized and this pluralistic environment—with its multinationally owned media platforms—does not allow for politicians to directly control media channels. In this context, politicians cannot simply “occupy” media channels as they did in the past; instead, they develop clever techniques to “manipulate” media actors. In this ever-complexifying media field, people’s choice cannot be artificially restricted, however, people can still be controlled with the new, refined methods of image management and marketing. Wermer applies

a very similar modernist narrative. As he argues, the primitive promotional campaigns of the past need to be forgotten since people resist promotions aggressively pushed into their face. Strategic marketing, as Wermer argues, would adequately answer this challenge, for it is aimed at cleverly orienting people's thought by giving them attractive ideas which may help them articulate their own political values. For Bajomi-Lázár, the transition from political propaganda to political marketing is a process that efficiently restitutes politicians' manipulative control over media and audiences in the new media age. By contrast, the transition process diagnosed by Wermer would lead from a promotion model to a marketing model, and it would bring with itself a highly efficient empowerment of the popular audience, a very rebirth of democratic agency, and the political success of those politicians who act as agents of popular democracy.

The two narratives of Bajomi-Lázár and Wermer have been constructed from very similar binary concepts and distinctions. The two accounts are heavily overlapping (both envisioning the rise of an "active audience," the obliteration of old techniques of control, and the spread of new, more efficient methods that allow for cleverly orienting today's media-using citizens), and still, they fundamentally diverge from each other when it comes to judging the process they analyze (one envisioning a new manipulable panopticon, the other a new liberation of people). The paradoxical, overlapping antagonism between the two narratives reveals the very symbolic force of modernist myth creation, which operates by flexibly rearranging a common set of binary concepts and maintains a shared mythical ground even among the fiercest contenders.

The "overlapping antagonism" of these two narratives reveals well the very nature of modernist myth creation, the main goal of which lies in neutralizing the inner contradictions of the popular media world, in order to maintain a familiar interpretive universe, with its familiar tropes and concepts. Bajomi-Lázár and Wermer develop similar ideas about how selectively today's "active audiences" "connect" with today's popular media, but also how the same people can be influenced and controlled by actors who cleverly exploit today's systemic media rules. Meanwhile, the two authors have neutralized the contradictions between the alleged "activity" and "controllability" of the audience in very different ways and have drawn very sharp and antagonistic diagnoses from the same set of similarly perceived symptoms. For Bajomi-

Lázár, the emerging techniques of active control serve to manipulate, and for Wermer, to empower.

These excerpts can hardly do more than illustrate the fact that the key tropes of the fifth estate's discourse have thoroughly shaped the professional understanding of popular media in Hungary. The reason I have chosen the interviews with András Wermer as an illustration is that he was the chief strategist of Fidesz's electoral campaign in 2001–2. This campaign was the first emanation of marketing-driven politics in Hungary, and as such, it is the object of the empirical case study to be presented below. The interviews with Wermer reveal well how the modernist tropes of political marketing shaped the Fidesz campaign that he ran in 1998 and in 2002.

Chapter 6 will analyze a heavily mediatized political campaign that the right-wing party Fidesz performed in government in 2001–2, a campaign that has not been surpassed ever since, neither in its scope and nor in its innovative usage of the “neopopular” principles of political marketing. As I will show, Fidesz engaged in an intense “celebratory” performance that had been designed to “connect” Hungarian middlemen, to reach “middle Hungary” and gather it under the flag of the New Right. The government's “celebratory” performance very successfully shaped the political agenda perception of people. However, in spite of this success, the government was unable to reach and hold the “center ground.” This is because the neopopular strategies Fidesz actors used to connect with the middle ground had been inherently self-undermining. The Fidesz performance has spiraled into unrecognized flows of collective mobilization: a “latent event” that silently undermined the power of the performance that had incited it. Chapter 7 offers a theory of latent events and of the media landscape saturated by them.

⁴ This was a reference to a campaign slogan.

Modernist Myths, Tropes, and Practices in the Narratives of Two Leading Hungarian Media Experts

Popular connection: how people, politics and media actively “connect”

Bajomi-Lázár To put it in the jargon of neo-Durkheimian media sociology: political communication techniques originating in the *transmission model* of communication tend to surrender to techniques based upon the *ritual model* of communication. Modern acts of political communication mostly have a ritual character.

There is a natural need in people to create order from chaos, to understand and categorize the many-sided surrounding world, to find their political identities.

Unlike political propaganda, political marketing relies on the active participation of voters in the design of political action and political communication. The audience is provided with the opportunity to take part in the political process: in setting the agenda, defining political values, and establishing common opinion platforms.

Wermer Change works only if we all move to the same direction and we find the same things good and desirable. When a movement involving many people is created in a country, then something is born. What the example of the Finnish or the Irish shows is that having an economic plan is important, but the real thing starts when people begin to believe that they are able to make it happen.

What people want in the first place is to have a clear vision, and that the concrete steps of the government point to this direction and not another one.

When we vote, we do not vote about numbers (who has built what for how much), but about the idea, the spirit behind the thing. We vote about this because this is what we can identify ourselves with. We can certainly agree on what our worldview is, but it is much harder to agree on which concrete steps need to be taken to make it real.

The new rules of “active control” in the new media environment

Bajomi-Lázár

- Communicators spread short and, often, visualized messages, in order to catch their voters’ attention through tabloid and commercial media.
- They prefer to rely on polls and different forms of ‘consultation’ with voters in order to work out their political programs and campaign strategies.

- Communicators, in order to maintain permanent connections with voters, use means-of-engagement marketing and micro-targeting, such as SMS, email, interactive blogs, and community websites.
- Instead of leading public opinion, political elites try to follow it. They involve their potential voters in the creation of their political rhetoric and practices.
- Instead of entirely controlling the political campaign, political elites use grassroots campaign techniques and involve their supporters in spreading of messages and mobilizing voters.

Wermer

If we base the campaign on advertising, the heavy artillery, then it's inevitable that a lot will be spent on ammunition. In 1994, the advertising-based campaign of Fidesz secured 7 percent of the votes in the election. In 1998, the election campaign based on strategic marketing secured four times more voters, 28 percent, using only a quarter of the 1994 advertising budget.

Advertising is the machine gun, or the bomb, but not the army itself. Marketing is a way of thinking. Often a single idea or a few phrases placed into people's minds achieves a greater effect than an expensive ad campaign. If I can invent an appropriate word or expression for someone, this might be very effective. The word "*polgár*" was more fitting for Fidesz than a thousand billboards calling for people to vote for the party.

The so-called hiding voter does not tell you whether she votes left or right . . . however, if there is a marketing strategist involved, this situation may change tomorrow. The world is more varied than simply left or right. These labels can be transferred to new battlefields, to one, for example, in which a party of the past opposes a party of the future. People will relate to these labels in new ways. With a new label, a party itself can be transferred to a new mental box.

Liquid binarizing: A coherent story about how people are manipulated or empowered in the end

Bajomi-Lázár

Although in an ideal world the main goal of political communication would be to provide citizens with the relevant information necessary for them to make informed judgments, at the level of practice, a pragmatic understanding of political communication dominates: the goal of acquiring or keeping power sanctifies the means.

Actors apply new political communication techniques in order to reestablish their influence over an increasingly autonomous and multifaceted media field (and, through it, the voters). In the past, this influence was exercised overtly and with primitive means; today, influence is less apparent and more sophisticated.

Old analytical methods are not suitable to grasp the new means by which political elites today try to manipulate the media. The new “media management”—to be more precise, media manipulation—can only be revealed by detailed monitoring that nobody really does today in an organized and professional way.

Wermer

A happy, trustful mood dominated the country in 2002. This was because the majority did feel that, indeed, “the future has begun.”⁴ At the same time, “The future has begun” was a good slogan that everybody remembers.

To me, the most important thing was that people feel they can have personal dreams and the ability to make them come true. This is the vision that America was grounded on. . . . To me, politics was just a means to put this message into people’s heads. Whoever counters the message does not clash with me, but with people and with the potential of this country to take its fate into its hands.

People before walked on the street with their gaze lowered and few looked into my eyes. They felt they were a small people, inhabitants of a small country. I saw that we could change this in 2002. It was palpable that more and more people looked at themselves in a way that a man should look at himself. We needed solid self-confidence, people and nation alike.

Chapter 6

When Being Popular Is Dangerous: The Case of a Myth-Driven Political Campaign

In the following, I will present the orchestration and effects of a monumental “celebratory performance” in 2001–2, and its role in the constitution of the New Right in Hungary. The celebratory performance of Fidesz in 2001–2 was a consistent, clever, and powerful application of a key neopopular idea: that the key to political success in today’s popular media environment lies in occupying the “center ground,” in connecting and controlling the elusive, politically disloyal, middle-ground audience. The celebratory performance analyzed in the following played a prime role in the reconstitution of the political right in Hungary.

The term “celebratory politics” refers in this book to a newly emerging form of political performance which applies the promotional techniques of commercial popular culture in the broader field of political discourse and policy making, with the aim of creating a symbolic space from which all political controversy is excluded. Celebratory politics is enacted when political actors, relying on the symbolic and aesthetic power of popular media, successfully banish debate and controversy from a given terrain of political discourse and surround themselves with a positive, inclusive, and harmonic aura. Most importantly, what allows political “celebrators” to blow their trumpets unperturbed is the complicit support of their political opponents and of media actors. This opportunism results from actors’ awareness about the supposedly “extraordinary” cultural power of popular media to celebrate a case and to dismiss the skeptical and the unengaged. Politicians and

journalists may find it too risky to contest what they perceive to be actually consensual, and try to avoid becoming hurt by the consensus-defending force of popular media.

American politicians' almost unanimous support for the Iraq War in 2003 has been a typical emanation of celebratory politics. The Republican government led a celebratory campaign exploiting all the symbolic resources that post-9/11 popular media could offer for a "patriotic" cause (Rojecki 2008; Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003). Most Democrats provisionally rallied with the GOP, instead of contesting what they perceived as the overall dominant mood.¹ It goes without question that Democrats smelled correctly what was in (and "on") the air at the time: subsequent research has shown that "pro-war views were overwhelmingly more frequent" among the commentators of major networks (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003, 593). However, as the same authors have also convincingly shown, the GOP's propaganda machine and the TV networks' complicity were not the only factors in play. For they did not represent the majoritarian preferences of the electorate. There has been a huge amount of incertitude about the justness of the cause across the public—and it is only by overcoming these concerns that the public's consent has been gained in the end. Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis have rightly stressed that political and media propaganda won consent by feeding "misperceptions" about the war. What needs to be added, however, is that this consent might not have been achieved had Democrats not given up representing the public's existing concerns about incumbent foreign policy.

Celebratory politics does not need to bring that devastating consequences. The NATO and EU accession of many Eastern European countries have also been commonly and uncritically celebrated by mainstream politicians (Szczurbiak 2004; Krasovec and Lajh 2004). As suggested by Kapitány and Kapitány, the public discourse about EU enlargement before Hungary's accession smoothly found its culmination point in the accession celebration events in 2004, where

the European Union appear[ed] as: a peaceful, merry world; a land without borders; a world of tolerance; a world of cultural diversity; a land of modernity, technical and scientific development; a

¹ For the British case see Robinson, Goddard, and Parry 2009.

new historical period; an urban culture; a land of brotherhood, an alliance of peoples; home of youth and future; a land of Christian traditions; a synthesis between tradition and modernity; a world of creativity; the emergence of a new world (after the communist past of Eastern Europe). (Kapitány and Kapitány 2006, 127)

This list entails the celebratory symbols that have been interweaved into a mobilizing campaign, which was joined at the time even by the more skeptical mainstream parties. It is hard to reconstruct whether they joined the cause by inner conviction or by the fear that by talking about any objections or conditions regarding accession they could be easily polluted by the charge of nationalist fundamentalism.²

Celebratory politics should be grasped primarily in terms of political performance (that is, saying and doing, doing by saying), and not simply in those of communication or campaigning. This implies that the main protagonists and beneficiaries of celebratory politics are parties in government who are able to amalgamate campaigning, political discourse, and policy making (in line with the permanent campaign logic that dominates today's politics). Celebratory performances diverge from conventional positive campaigning in that they praise not merely the results, but the actual creation of the government's politics. Policy measures—the very process of their preparation and realization—are an integral part of the performance. Unlike positive campaigns, which praise the results of good governance, celebratory performances glorify the action of “doing” itself: the moment of political decision, the act of investment in the future, the ethos of risk taking and entrepreneurship. What is being praised here is political action and leadership itself,³ that is, the act of mobilizing the political

² The fear may not have been groundless. There is some modest empirical evidence suggesting that the popularity of the right-wing opposition in Hungary had been in decrease until the party stopped its euroskeptical rhetoric in late 2003 (Karácsony 2004).

³ The importance of leadership effects in celebratory performances has been revealed in Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis's study, which makes it clear that Americans' support for the Iraq War was a function of their sympathy for the president. “This was a standard rally-round-the-president effect, no doubt intensified by a felt imperative to close ranks in the post-September 11 environment” (Kull, Ramsay, and Lewis 2003, 596).

community. Citizens' engagement and participation is quintessential with regard to the performance's success and legitimation. Without audiences participating in the celebration of "making," the performance would inevitably fall back to the dubious status of "campaigning" (and would imminently be challenged by political opponents). With the celebration of political action, celebratory politics combines the principles of charismatic leadership and democratic politics. This conjuncture alone would not represent a risk: indeed, democracy badly needs its charismatic leaders. The dangers of celebratory politics lie elsewhere: in political actors' willingness and success in enforcing, with the help of promotional machinery, the lack of debate about this leadership.

Unfortunately, the (self-)celebratory efforts of governments are left uncontested more often than they should be, which is a clear danger to democracy. In the online Appendix to Chapter 5, I will overview the main causes of the emergence of celebratory politics worldwide. (See online Appendix 5.)

The creator and leading force of the Hungarian New Right has been the Fidesz Party (Alliance of Young Democrats), the most stable and popular right-wing party in Central Europe since 1998. The history of the party dates back to the years of democratic transition.⁴ By 1998, the number of Fidesz voters increased to 30 percent of the total population, which was enough to counterweigh the similarly extended electorate behind the leading force of the political left, the postcommunist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). After a successful electoral campaign, the Fidesz-led right-wing coalition triumphed over the incumbent government of socialists and liberals. In 1998, a quasi-two-party system emerged in Hungary: the two leading political forces, Fidesz and MSZP accounted for 72 percent of parliamentary mandates between 1998 and 2002.

Political analysts tend to overlook the ultimate importance of the new popular media environment in the successful reconstitution of the political right in Hungary. In 1997, seven years after the democratic transition, the media system was deregulated in Hungary, giving way

⁴ The party has been present in the Parliament since the first democratic elections in 1990, and performed a radical shift in the eight years that followed, turning from a marginal, alternative, liberal party to the leading force of the political right.

to two broadcast private TV channels (TV2 and RTL Klub), owned by multinational corporations. The appearance of commercial TV channels in Hungary made a profound contribution to the formation of the New Right. Commercial media as a terrain of symbolic warfare was much easier to understand and handle for the young, formerly liberal, conservative Fidesz politicians than for their postcommunist opponents from an older generation. From 1997 on, and especially during their years in government between 1998 and 2002, Fidesz leaders played with the potential of the new, popular media environment with a unique sense and spiritedness. Using various means of mediatized, promotional communication,⁵ they took their political camp's central identifying symbols (like "right-wing," "national," or "conservative") out of their conventional discursive context designated by traditionalism, rurality, or religiosity. Instead, Fidesz actors created a new, multifocal, mediatized right-wing identity, expressed by strong and appealing symbols that were not, however, arranged around a singular, central ideological core.⁶

Although, generally speaking, Fidesz communicators have successfully exploited the mobilizing potential of commercial media, they engaged in conflicts with some of its actors sympathizing with left-wing

⁵ The logic of promotional communication was present very early in the self-understanding of Fidesz politicians. As one of them revealed on a university forum in 1998, they intended to offer and sell a "political vision" rather than getting involved in endless debates.

⁶ This interpretation contradicts the popular image of the 2002 campaign as brutally "tearing up" society into two disconnected parts with antagonistic and internally homogeneous value systems. However, this interpretation reflects the common interest of both political camps and their elite networks in projecting their antagonism to the totality of the society. Research into the political views and opinions of everyday people draws a much more complex and ambivalent picture. The life-and-death battle that many observers remember was much more limited in its scope and duration than commonly believed. First, the craze started in the end of March, the very final two weeks of the campaign (my research was executed in the ending weeks of the campaign's middle period (early and middle March, the survey itself was taken between the 18th and 20th). Second, people who were less interested in the symbolic battles of party politics found the 2002 campaign more peaceful than it seemed from the viewpoint of Hungary's ideologically and symbolically hyperpolarized intelligentsia.

political forces.⁷ This ambivalence resulted in a rather schizophrenic situation. On the one hand, the right-wing élite was constantly accusing commercial television stations of being hostile toward them, supposedly resulting from their consumerist, cosmopolitan, secular character and fraternizing attitude with postcommunist political forces. Meanwhile, actors of the left-wing élite nourished a never-ending moral panic over the Fidesz “propaganda machine” and the unscrupulous degradation of politics into spin, promotion, and tabloidized media spectacle.⁸ Fidesz’s vantage point in addressing people by the means of modern marketing techniques was acknowledged by the left-wing press, which presented an image of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as a talented and crafty communicator albeit one whose intentions were dubious.

Although Fidesz, after four years in government, lost the elections in 2002, their last year in power played a salient role in the consolidation of a formerly ephemeral electoral basis into a loyal New Right electorate in Hungary.⁹ In 2001, after three years in government, Fidesz politicians launched a harsh and expressive campaign with the aim of expanding their stable and ideologically committed electoral core and, at the same time, keeping the sympathy of larger and less committed voter segments. Obviously, the two aims do not necessarily harmonize: the ideological closure and harshness needed by the former may easily hinder the latter. This duality manifested itself in the right’s campaign, expressing on the one hand a bitter antagonism between (post)communist and national-democratic forces, while, on the other hand, presenting an image of economic recovery, social harmony, and a collective “take off.” Fidesz campaign strategists creatively established a common discursive ground for both narratives.

The ground of Fidesz’s vision consisted of two symbolic messages. The first one expressed the idea of Change, the crossing of the border

⁷ The most explicitly left-biased program is a weekly infotainment talk show (*Heti Hetes*), a licensed program of RTL (the original’s title is *Sieben Tage, Sieben Köpfe*), with journalists and artists commenting on politics. The talk show played an important role in left-wing mobilization.

⁸ See some of the essays in Sükösd and Vásárhelyi 2002.

⁹ As subsequent research has demonstrated, the 2001–2 period was quintessential in consolidating the extreme political volatility that characterized Hungary, among other young democracies in the postcommunist region of Central Europe (Tóka 1998).

between Old and New, as proclaimed in the election program “The Future Has Begun.” The Fidesz campaign itself was orchestrated as a rite of passage, through which the amorphous aggregate of disintegrated individuals was being transformed into a self-conscious political community. The second metaphor, the imaginary figure of the “*polgár*” (the word originates in the German “*Bürger*”), was aimed at providing this transformation with meaning. Being—becoming—a “*polgár*” emblemized at the same time the entrepreneurial attitude of the bourgeois, the political duties of the citizen, and the communal engagement of the civil society member, each aspect representing the republican ethos of individual and communal responsibility. The symbols together constituted a field of association wide enough to simultaneously offer various positions of identification. The slogan “*Hajrá Magyarország!*” (Go Hungary!) and the new world populated by *polgárs* and their political leaders who would empower them was equally meaningful for the committed and the uncommitted, the anti-communist, the nationalist, the faithful, the consumer interested in economic growth and increasing living standards, the lower classes wanting a socially responsible state, and the upper classes celebrating individual entrepreneurship.

With the astutely flexible usage of a few unifying symbols, Fidesz promoted a new “alliance” between the government and the people, and it presented the two sides as together taking the nation’s common destiny in their hands. In their vision, politics was manifested as a service, a providing state, in which—as was made explicit several times (Fricz 2004, 54)—the main “duty of the government is governing,” beyond political mud-throwing. The ethos of collective entrepreneurship symbolized by the term “alliance” excludes political controversy and supports celebratory communication. Throughout the performance, the government positioned itself as the catalyst of the collective momentum.

Importantly, the celebratory performance of socioeconomic recovery was enacted through several important policy measures: partly long-term economic and cultural investments, partly the reallocation of state funds from the poor to the middle class by allowing state-subsidized credit to go to farmers, students and first-time home buyers. All these measures were promoted as part of the government’s “Széchenyi Project,” named after a nineteenth-century statesman. The

program itself was advertised on thousands of billboards and compulsorily included all the organizations financed by it. Day by day, various actors—local politicians, civil organizers of opening launches, private entrepreneurs, economists—joined in (with their own testimonies) the celebratory performance initiated by the government.

6.1. The Media Coverage of the New Right's Celebratory Performance in 2001–2

The following analysis will be based on data gathered in 2002, in the framework of a research project on the formation and reception of the political agenda in Hungary. The study, which involved the triangulation of content analysis, focus group research and survey research, was aimed at assessing the success of the agenda-setting strategies of news organs and political parties. The fifteen most frequently covered issues of the 2002 campaign period were selected for analysis, regardless of whether they were explicitly political or not. The fifteen issues ranged from traditional political debates about ideology-driven policy measures to the life imprisonment of a pedophile murderer.

The celebratory performance of Fidesz was enacted through five media-friendly, eventlike issues that were intended to represent the country's collective momentum and the government's catalyzing role. These heavily eventized issues of the 2001–2 electoral campaign will be called “celebratory” issues in the following: They will be distinguished from more conventional, conflict-driven political debates (which will be referred to, to keep it simple, as “debate” issues). Celebratory issues stood apart clearly from debate ones, given their outstandingly positive presentation by TV news and newspapers. The remaining five issues on the media agenda did not have a party-political character. They can be categorized as social conflicts (two issues fell into this category) and biopolitical issues. Social conflict issues represented conflicts over legal entitlements between people and institutions. Biopolitical issues represented conflicts over the integrity of the body and anxieties about the possible violation of an individual's personal integrity boundaries.

The fifteen issues, ranged into the four categories above, read as follows:

Celebratory issues:

- The government introduces a subsidized real estate credit for first-time home buyers.
- The government launches a referendum campaign for Hungary to be nominated as host of the 2012 Olympic Games.
- The opening of the new National Theater.
- The government opens the House of Terror, dedicated to the victims of Communism and Fascism.
- Prime Minister Orbán flew to Boston at state expense to accept an honorary doctorate granted by Tufts University.

Debate issues—party-political conflicts:

- The right-wing government introduced a law giving special status to Hungarian minorities living abroad.
- A debate on the date and place of the TV debate between the incumbent PM and the Socialist PM nominee.
- Conflict with the Czech and Slovak Republics because Hungarian PM urges the abrogation of the Beneš decrees degrading German and Hungarian minorities after WW II.
- An extreme right party, MIÉP, offers to enter a coalition with the right-wing party leading the government.
- The Socialist PM nominee is involved in corruption.

Non-party-political issues—social conflicts:

- Nurses go on a countrywide strike for better living and working standards.
- An insurance company abrogates its contracts with people living in areas endangered by river floods.

Non-party-political issues—biopolitical issues:

- Cheap imported chicken meat contaminated by antibiotics appears in Hungary.
- A man suspected of killing a little girl has been sentenced to life imprisonment even though the evidence is questionable.

- Two policemen were convicted of beating a homeless person (the beating was recorded) and sentenced.

The editorial strategies of five news organs were analyzed¹⁰ by coding all the news they presented during two and a half months from January to March 2002 (which was the early and middle period of the campaign preceding the elections on 8 April). The basic unit of analysis was not the news item, but the “utterance.” A typical news item was broken down into three or four utterances, typically the reporter/journalist being the first to speak, starting the narrative, and then, politicians, experts, or ordinary people giving their interpretations of the issue. The quantitative content analysis addressed formal characteristics of utterances (like the frequency of issues or the positivity of the presentation), but also the discursive frames and statements presented.

The content analysis enables us to assess the general positivity or ambiguity of each of the fifteen issues examined. Two aspects of positivity have been explored: the overall positive or negative tone of utterances, and the overall support of actors toward the government’s and the opposition’s standpoint. These two variables are presented in the first two columns of Table 3.1, in relation to each of the fifteen issues examined. The first column represents the average positivity of an issue’s coverage, while the second column reveals the average proportion of utterances supporting the government and the opposition.¹¹ The three next columns show the average weight of each issue on the overall agenda of the five news organs, on the agenda of Fidesz, and on that of the leading party of the opposition, the postcommunist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP).

¹⁰ Three of them were early evening news programs, that of PSB television (m1) and those of its main commercial competitors (RTL Klub, TV2). The two leading press organs have also been included in the analysis: the left-wing daily *Népszabadság* (People’s freedom) and the right-wing daily *Magyar Nemzet* (Hungarian nation).

¹¹ The numbers represent the overall proportion of progovernment and pro-opposition utterances, made by politicians, journalists, experts, and other actors.

The last column of the table presents evidence gathered from a representative survey of citizens, taken between 15 and 19 March. Respondents have been asked about which issues of the campaign they found “personally relevant.” Each respondent had to choose five items from the menu of the fifteen content-analyzed issues. Thus, while an issue of average relevance would be selected by 33 percent of people, the actual selection rates of particular issues have ranged from 14 to 52 percent. The survey results will be analyzed in later sections.

As Table 3.1 reveals, the coverage of some political issues was spectacularly conflict-free. Considering the outstanding weight of positive and progovernment utterances in their media coverage, I have ranged the first five issues in Table 3.1 to the genre of celebratory politics.¹² The government’s celebratory issues can be divided in two groups: that of media-friendly events and that of a single policy issue which, although the most positively covered of all, was less “eventized.” This latter issue is to be found in the first row of Table 3.1. It is the introduction, only two months before the elections, of a state-subsidized real estate credit designed to help people buying their first home. No political or other actors questioned these measures at all (which, later, were criticized for shifting social policy in a wrong and unsustainable direction). The three other celebratory issues were typical pseudo-events, aimed at representing the vision of a strong and viable (national) community. One of them was a referendum campaign the government

¹² In the first three issues listed in Table 3.1, the absolute majority of utterances proved positive. The weight of positive coverage approached 50 percent in the case of the fourth issue, as well (the opening of the House of Terror museum). Regarding the speakers’ support of the two political camps, the issues arranged themselves very similarly. In the first three issues, the government’s position was very strong, and the overall proportion of progovernment and pro-opposition utterances significantly exceeded the average value of 2 to 1. From this aspect, the House of Terror opening, with a 3 to 1 lead of progovernment utterances, seems to be closer to the first three issues. The last celebratory issue has been a failure. This was the state-financed flight of Primer Minister Viktor Orbán to Boston to receive a prize from Tufts University. The dubious financing of the flight made the issue highly ambivalent, oscillating between the debate and the celebratory category. The issue was among the most extraordinary aspects of the 2002 campaign. For now, it is enough to note that it does not significantly influence the results of the following analysis.

Table 3.1. *Media Coverage, Political Coverage and Audience Appreciation of the Fifteen Issues Analyzed*

	Content analysis				Survey analysis	
	Positivity (% of positive utterances)	Support for gov (%) : opp (%)	Weight on media agenda (%)	Weight on Fidesz agenda (%)		Weight on MSZP agenda (%)
CELEBRATORY ISSUES						
Real estate credit	93	88 : 0	3	5.5	--	51
Olympic Games referendum	66	76 : 10	6	10	3	52
National Theatre	53	28 : 9	4	0.5	--	39
House of Terror	46	59 : 22	5	6.5	2.5	33
PM flies to Boston	44	60 : 33	3	2.5	3	38
DEBATE ISSUES						
Special status of ethnic Hungarians	39	58 : 27	40	35	43	33
TV debate between PM nominees	20	40 : 40	6	16	26	46
Conflict over the Beneš decrees	17	38 : 38	12	14	13	15
Coalition offer by the extreme right	12	65 : 31	4	8.5	6	18
Corruption affair of PM nominee	6	50 : 38	2	1	2	14
NON-PARTY-POLITICAL ISSUES						
Insurance company abrogates contracts	31	30 : 3	3	--	1	27
Contaminated imported chicken meat	25	14 : 0	5	--	0.5	42
Nurse strike	18	36 : 53	2	0.5	--	23
Pedophile murderer	0	0 : 2	3	--	--	25
Policemen beat homeless	0	0 : 0	3	--	--	39
Average means/the sum of values	mean= 35%	mean= 50% : 25%	Σ=100%	Σ=100%	Σ=100%	mean=33%

launched to support Hungary's nomination to host the 2012 Olympic Games. Several hundreds of thousands of signatures were collected in support of the government. The third celebratory issue of the 2002 campaign was the opening of the new National Theater building, with the premiere timed to take place three weeks before the elections. The fourth celebratory issue, the opening of the House of Terror museum commemorating the victims of Fascism and Communism, was another opening ceremony, another mobilizing act in the row of events praising the dawn of a new era.¹³ The last of celebratory issues was the state-financed flight of Prime Minister Orbán, who traveled to Boston to receive an honorary doctorate granted by Tufts University. Orbán hired a private airplane at state expenses, inciting some public controversy. This made the issue somewhat ambivalent, oscillating between the debate and the celebratory category.¹⁴

Political controversy was much more accentuated in other political issues, categorized as "debate issues" in Table 3.1. Two of these issues dominated political discourse in the period examined, both addressing the problems of national identity and ethnic Hungarian minori-

¹³ The status of the last celebratory issue, the opening of the House of Terror museum, is less self-evident. On the one hand, it was the typical mediatized celebration of the dawn of a new era, appearing in a thousand other forms in the Fidesz campaign. Although the museum's heavily spectacularized mnemopolitics was sharply debated on various intellectual fora, the general media representation of the opening was rather uncritical and devoid of explicit ideological debates. The news programs on the two private TV channels—the most popular news organs in Hungary—covered the event even more positively than other organs (55 percent of utterances being positive). From their angle, the opening of the museum was just another cultural event to be reported on, similar to the opening of the new National Theater.

¹⁴ Although the issue seems to be a typical media event, originally it was not intended to be promoted to the wider public beyond the confines of the narrower partisan press. The issue gained a dubious publicity when it turned out that Orbán flew on a private aircraft at state expense. In spite of this, positive reports on the prize were not overwhelmed by the financing "scandal." It has to be added that opposition parties did not make any efforts to aggrandize the scandal, so, after all, the issue was covered by the media slightly more positively than the average. This issue deserves particular attention since it has proved to be by far the most divisive issue. It mobilized left-wing people who interpreted the issue as another example of the government's unscrupulousness. This antigovernment mobilizing power of the issue emerged in spite of the silence of the parties in opposition.

ties in Central Europe. The Fidesz government provided Hungarian minorities in surrounding countries with a special citizenship status, including extended rights to employment, social insurance, and education (but not to political participation). The extreme appeal of these measures—in policy, political, and ideological terms equally—provided this issue with an outstanding weight on the media agenda (around 50 percent in the press and 30 percent in private TV news). The second most prominent issue was a typical late modern ballyhoo on the mediated political process: it was a futile controversy over which prime ministerial nominee and party was entitled to set the parameters for the televised candidate debate.

The celebratory issues' positivity resulted from the reluctance of the opposition to debate them (as presented in column 5 of Table 3.1). Politicians from MSZP, the leading left-wing party, opportunistically avoided any critical comments about celebratory issues, which seemed so appealing and incontestable at the time. While Fidesz actors devoted 22 percent of their utterances to celebratory issues, Socialists devoted only 5.5 percent (which makes eleven utterances altogether). What is more, even in those rare moments when they spoke out on celebratory issues, Socialists were not critical at all: the majority of their sporadic utterances, seven out of eleven, were positive!¹⁵ As Table 3.1 shows, left-wing parties were much more active in conventional, conflictive, "debate" issues than in "celebratory" ones. They aspired to construct a negative vision of Fidesz as an aggressive, unscrupulous political force—and hoped (somewhat rightly, as we will see) that their harsh attack politics would deter voters from buying their opponent's seductive harmony. Thus, political controversy was heavily accentuated in more conventional political issues, assigned as "debate issues" in Table 3.2.

The last aspect of celebratory issues that has to be dealt with is their weight on the media agenda. Our data show that the celebratory issues of Fidesz received limited media coverage. While the four unequivocally celebratory issues together occupied only 18 percent of the overall media agenda, the weight of debate issues was much larger

¹⁵ Unlike the Socialists, politicians of the liberal SZDSZ, the smaller party in opposition, did try to denounce some of the celebratory issues. However, given their minor role in the media, they did not manage to reposition the issues and destroy their—often overwhelming—positivity.

Table 3.2. The Number and Proportion of Utterances Made by Parties about Issue Categories

	Debate (ideology)*	Debate (campaign)*	Celebratory	
Fidesz	100	57	45	202
	50 %	28 %	22%	100%
MSZP (post-communist opposition)	112	74	11	197
	57%	38%	6%	100%
SZDSZ (liberal opposition)	33	4	14	51
	65%	8%	27%	100%
Government and ministry officers	181	29	37	247
	73%	12%	15%	100%

*Debate issues have been split into two groups. The “national ideology” group consists of the status law issue and the conflict with the Czech Republic, while the “campaign” group is made up of the remaining debate issues, directly related to electoral competition.

(68 percent). Perhaps this limited coverage was the price of keeping celebratory issues uncontested, uncontaminated by political controversy. A more aggressive pushing of the celebratory issues by Fidesz might have prompted political opponents to directly counterattack, instead of looking for other issues with which to contest the government. Celebratory politics is arguably too much dependent on opponents’—always conditional—willingness to temporarily withdraw their criticism.

To sum up, the government successfully created a celebratory space from which political controversy was excluded. The content analytical evidence presented makes it clear that the governing party Fidesz was able to perform its celebratory vision of national recovery by a set of closely controlled and uncontested issues. These issues were relatively marginal at the media agenda (considering all the utterances that leading media channels devoted to the fifteen issues analyzed, only 21 percent of the coverage was devoted to the five celebratory issues). However, these issues were presented in an unusually posi-

tive tone and they successfully escaped the controversy that in general characterizes political news discourse. Even the more, the leading party of the opposition openly capitulated to the celebratory performance of Fidesz. As I have shown earlier, Fidesz actors devoted to celebratory issues 22 percent of their utterances, and Socialists only 5.5 percent (eleven utterances, seven of which being positive and not critical).

In the following, we will examine whether and how the uncontested celebratory campaign has been mirrored in voters' agenda perception and political loyalty. Did celebratory issues attract audience attention? If so, were they able to successfully impose their mobilizing message on the audience? In the following section, we will examine whether and how Fidesz was able to turn the uncontested aura of celebratory issues to voter loyalty.

6.2. The Ambiguous Reception of Celebratory Politics

To assess what degree of personal importance people attributed to the fifteen issues analyzed, survey respondents were asked to select the five issues they felt the most relevant personally. As revealed in the last column of Table 3.1, the importance attributed to issues varied considerably, with a "selection rate" of issues ranging from 14 percent to 52 percent. Only two issues were found relevant by the majority. The two that enjoyed the most unequivocal and uncontested celebratory coverage were the real estate credit issue (51 percent of respondents selects as personally important) and the Olympics referendum issue (52 percent). The relevance attributed to celebratory issues on average surpassed by far the average salience level of conventional, "debate" issues. Even the status law issue—which occupied 40 percent of the media agenda—was judged important only by one-third of the people, which is in sharp contrast to the issue's pervasive presence on all media channels, and the political hysteria it provoked.¹⁶

¹⁶ Most importantly, these issues did not fail because they would have been too complex, or too distant from people's everyday lives. Parties in opposition did their best to draw the darkest possible scenario of the everyday social consequences of the status law issue. People were provided with detailed

Based on Table 3.1, we can intuitively conclude that the more celebratory the tone of a political issue, the more relevance people attributed to it. Following this hint, I have combined content and survey evidence and calculated the correlation between the three key aspects of issues' media coverage (their overall positivity, their favorability either to the government or to the opposition, and their overall weight on the media agenda) and the salience of issues in public opinion, as revealed by the survey analysis.

Table 3.3 demonstrates the extraordinary success of celebratory politics in attracting audience interest. Correlation coefficients reveal an almost perfect correspondence between the celebratory tone of an issue (its positivity and progovernment bias) and the level of personal relevance people attributed to it. Although relatively marginal, celebratory issues crowded out other political issues (like the otherwise omnipresent status law issue) from people's agenda perception. By contrast, the overall weight of an issue on the media agenda did not affect at all people's judgment of how important the issue was. Agenda setting proved to be propelled entirely by issues' positivity, independently of how "big" the issues have been.

Moreover, the point is not only that celebratory issues grabbed an outstanding degree of attention. Perhaps even more importantly, voters were well aware that they embodied a whole new way of making politics. This popular awareness manifested itself in the fact that survey respondents tended to select celebratory issues together when they were asked to name the five issues that mattered to them. In people's minds, celebratory issues clearly stood apart from the more conventional, "debate" issues of party politics. The hidden structure of attraction and repulsion among issues may well be explored with cluster analytical methods. The diagram below reveals how people have grouped (instinctively) individual issues into issue clusters. The closer the issues on the diagram, the more frequently they were coselected among the five personally relevant issues. By contrast, issues arranged into different clusters were only rarely coselected.

information about the potential everyday consequences of the opening of the Hungarian labor market to the Slovaks, Romanians, and Serbs coming from surrounding countries (the government's proposal did not apply ethnic discrimination among applicants for the Hungarian citizenship status).

Table 3.3. The Correspondence of the Media Coverage and Perceived Relevance of Issues

	Issue coverage (content analysis)			Issue perception (survey)
	Positivity	Support for gov't and opp	Weight on media agenda	Personal relevance
Positivity		0.89	(-.06)	0.8
Support			(-.18)	0.67
Weight				(-.07)

Pearson correlation coefficients: Only the ten explicitly political issues have been examined. Values in parentheses are not significant at a 0.05 level. The analysis has been based on the data presented in Table 3.2. The variable "Positivity" represents the overall weight of positive utterances in the coverage of an issue. The variable "Support for gov't and opp" represents the weight of progovernment utterances relative to pro-opposition utterances (the quotient of the two). The "Weight on media agenda" variable represents the overall number of utterances in the media. The "Personal relevance" variable represents the proportion of survey respondents who selected a given issue among the five most personally important.

As demonstrated by the diagram above, people felt celebratory issues as related and as detached from old-style party-political and ideological debates. Celebratory issues clearly stood apart from debater party politics in the eyes of the public. The issue structure¹⁷ demonstrates that people selected between issues neither randomly nor following their divergent private individual interests. People were well aware that they were facing a new type of political mobilization, an unusually strong and

¹⁷ Political issues stand apart from off-political ones, and there is a clear cleavage between debate and celebratory issues as well. Even the finer distinctions are meaningful: inside the "debate" cluster, the two heavily ideological policy issues (status law and Beneš decree) deviate from mediatized party-political issues directly related to the electoral campaign. Inside the off-political cluster, broader social problems (the nurses' strike and river flood insurance) stand apart from biopolitical issues addressing the management and integrity of the body (contaminated meat, beating of homeless people, and the trial of a pedophile murderer).

Figure 3.1. The “Kinship Structure” of the Fifteen Issues as Perceived by the Public

ISSUE	ISSUE TYPE	DENDROGRAM
Status law	DEBATE	
Beneš decrees	DEBATE	
Debate on TV debate	DEBATE	
Extremist coalition	DEBATE	
PM nominee corrupt	DEBATE	
House of Terror	CELEBR	
National Theatre	CELEBR	
Olympics campaign	CELEBR	
Nurse strike	OFF POL	
Insurance company	OFF POL	
Real estate credit	CELEBR	
Paedophile murder	OFF POL	
Homeless beating	OFF POL	
Contaminated meat	OFF POL	
PM in Boston	CELEBR	

appealing vision made up of celebratory issues: the Olympics campaign, the opening of the National Theater, and the House of Terror museum. The fourth celebratory issue, subsidized real estate credit for first-time home buyers, was typically coselected with “social issues,” that is, with political issues of larger social importance which people clearly distinguished from more tabloid issues. The fifth—and most ambiguous—celebratory issue (the Boston trip of Prime Minister Orbán) was often coselected with biopolitical and non-party-political issues. The fact that celebratory issues were coselected with non-party-political ones more often indicates their general appeal and ability to address people who are otherwise uninterested in party politics.

On the whole, we may conclude that celebratory issues had a prominent power to attract audience interest, and on top of all that, they were perceived as interrelated, embodying similar symbolic messages that differ from old-style ideological party debates. They were systematically coselected by people (or commonly evaded by those who found them insignificant), which proves that in people’s eyes individual celebratory issues transcended themselves and stood for some-

thing more general: they represented the mobilizing vision of national recovery promoted by the government.

So far, our analysis suggests that Fidesz politicians were able to blow their own horn through their uncontested celebratory issues and enjoyed the attention of the public. However, the attention did not turn itself into engagement, and celebratory issues did not trigger a “celebratory” reception. On the contrary, as it turned out, many people marked them as “personally relevant” just because they felt frightened or upset about the political message that these issues celebrated.

People’s attitudes about the two most popular celebratory issues proved highly ambivalent, even among right-wing voters. The promise of celebratory communication, the suspension of political controversy, was not fulfilled. The Olympics campaign was backed by the minority of the population, while the majority explicitly opposed it. People were also split about the real estate credit issue, with 40 percent being pro, 40 percent con, and 20 percent neutral or undecided.¹⁸ This widespread reluctance to engage is notable given the relative lack of issue-related criticism people would have been provided with by parties in opposition or by critical journalists.

In Table 3.4, people’s attitudes about the two most important celebratory issues are examined in three voter segments (left-wing, right-wing, and undecided), each representing one-third of the population.

The first thing to be observed is that the “personal relevance” attributed to celebratory issues was only slightly influenced by people’s political affiliations: 51 percent and 54 percent of right-wing voters treated the two issues as personally relevant, as opposed to the 50 percent and 45 percent among left-wing voters claiming the same. Celebratory issues’ appeal extended well beyond the governments’ electoral basis. Large segments of differently minded or undecided people marked celebratory politics as personally relevant. Left-wing and middle-ground voters refused to accept the invitation of the left-wing opposition to focus on controversial, debate politics.

¹⁸ In the absence of attitude questions on the two other celebratory issues, only the reception of the Olympics campaign and the real estate subsidy will be explored. People’s attitude to the Olympics campaign has been measured by a four-grade scale, while opinions about the real estate credit have been estimated by a five-grade scale.

Table 3.4. The Opinion of Voters about Celebratory Issues in Relation to Their Perception of the Issues as “Personally Relevant” and Their Political Affiliation

“The idea of the Olympics in Hungary is a mere campaign trick of Fidesz.”				“The subsidized real estate credit helps those who need it.”			
		Attitude about statement above				Attitude about statement above	
Political affiliation	Selects the issue as personally relevant	Dis-agrees	Agrees	Political affiliation	Selects the issue as personally relevant	Agrees	Dis-agrees AND neutral
Right-wing (25% of voters)	No (49%)	72	28	Right-wing (25% of voters)	No (46%)	49	51
	Yes (51%)	76	24		Yes (54%)	72	38
	total	74	26		total	62	38
Middle (40% of voters)	No (48%)	34	66	Middle (40% of voters)	No (44%)	33	67
	Yes (52%)	60	40		Yes (56%)	43	57
	total	48	52		total	39	61
Left-wing (35% of voters)	No (50%)	18	82	Left-wing (35% of voters)	No (55%)	26	74
	Yes (50%)	33	67		Yes (45%)	34	64
	total	26	74		total	29	71

The overall salience of celebratory issues, however, did not result in a clear-cut rallying effect. In spite of the opposition’s absenteeist strategy on celebratory issues, people’s attitudes about them were heavily determined by their political stance. In the right-wing segment, three-quarters of the voters backed the idea of hosting the Olympics, and 62 percent welcomed the real estate credit subsidy. The corresponding numbers among the left-wing were, respectively, 26 percent

and 29 percent (48 percent and 39 percent among the politically undecided).¹⁹

Most important for us is the fact that the two outstanding celebratory issues did not inspire overwhelming excitement among middle-ground voters. Less than a half of middle-ground voters sympathized with the two key celebratory issues; they clearly failed to conquer the “center ground” despite their uncontested presence in the media and their hegemony in voters’ salience map during the campaign.²⁰

¹⁹ Moreover, as the table makes it clear, those left-wing voters who chose the issue of Olympics or the real estate credit as personally relevant did not judge them in considerably more positive terms than those who omitted the same issues. Only one-third of this voter segment sympathized with the government’s position regarding the Olympics campaign and the real estate credit (33 percent and 34 percent). In general, the “personal relevance” people attributed to the issues did not imply a more positive stance toward them. In other words, people did not select the issues as “personally relevant” because they would have judged them much more favorably than those omitting the issues. The number of those judging them positively was only 10 percent to 15 percent higher among selectors than among omitters.

²⁰ The findings may add new “neopopular,” modernist insights to the established scholarly narratives about media power. Two theoretical models may be worth mentioning: the model of agenda setting, and that of “media malaise.”

Our findings call for reconsidering a basic assumption of agenda-setting research, according to which it is the frequency of issue coverage that frames popular agenda perception (McCombs and Reynolds 2002). In our case, an issue’s weight on the media agenda played no role at all. People’s attention was aroused by relatively marginal issues that they found appealing and expressive, representing a new genre of communication, projecting a firm political vision. Arguably, in a popular media environment, highly expressive issues may have more chance of capturing audiences’ imagination than issues presented repetitively, but with less aesthetic power. If an issue lacks an aura of exceptionality, it risks merging, however frequently it may be covered, into the loud and disturbing noise of today’s cluttered, attraction-hunting media environment. By contrast, issues that are seen as exceptional, however marginally they are covered, may have an increasing chance to attract audience attention. There are good reasons to argue that late modern media rewards those issues that are able to rise, by their exceptional aesthetic force, above the usual, disorienting media clutter. Celebratory politics may be a typical and successful way to create the aura of exceptionality, to attract audience attention and, as the classical agenda-setting formula suggests, to “tell people what to think about.” This would be a plausible modernist, “neopopular” hypothesis that could think further Maxwell McCombs’s original theory.

6.3. Celebratory Politics and the Middle Ground of the Hungarian Electorate

The key point of this book's empirical analysis will be the following: the celebratory performance of Fidesz was doomed to miss the "popular middle ground" because with all its innovativeness and attractiveness, it initiated collective reactions that actors and experts could not control and even recognize with their "neopopular" interpretive tools. The fall of the Fidesz campaign proves, as I will try to show, two things at the same time: first, that the middle-ground popular audience can hardly be "connected and controlled" in the way suggested by the fifth estate's "neopopular" cookbooks; and second, that this failure can hardly be explained with typical "modernist" accounts of selective perception and elusive, active audiences (who would have resisted the campaign), for it directly stemmed from the self-undermining, counterperformative forces that were unleashed by Fidesz's "neopopular" campaign strategies. The modernist strategies of connecting and controlling the popular middle ground

The attraction to celebratory issues challenges some aspects of the dominant critical scholarly narrative on media commercialization. Reacting to the commercialization process in the 1990s, critical scholars have objected that media actors' relentless competition for audience attention allows the sensationalist frames of scandal, horse race, and power game to take over the media coverage of politics. This type of coverage, critics have argued, produces an alienated, cynical electorate (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) which, following the cues offered by television, makes people "feel good about feeling bad about politics" (Hart 1994, 10). The background assumption has been that "dirty politics" is mostly attractive for the audience. However, what our case study suggests is that people are not always that self-evidently responsive to the negative coverage of politics. In the 2002 campaign, the negativity of an issue's coverage strongly decreased its chance of being listened to by audiences. The thing people were the least interested in was mud throwing, controversy, and scandal "in themselves." What aroused their interest, by contrast, was the New Right's celebratory vision of national recovery. The fact that people were aroused by an expressive political vision (and voted for or against it in unprecedented proportions) undermines the public cynicism argument of the 1990s. Our case, again, could be a base of interesting alternative hypotheses about the "new rules" of emotional arousal in the popular media environment.

unleashed a collective mobilization, a new and unprecedented form of political polarization that turned against its “celebrating” initiators.

Let us start from the point that the celebratory performance of Fidesz in 2001–2 may well be seen as a grandiose attempt to reshape the key antagonism of the political space in Hungary. Since 1989, Hungarian politics was divided along a century-old debate that spontaneously revived with the fall of Communism. The historic antagonism²¹ of progressives and nationalists provided a self-evident frame of reference for Hungarian political and intellectual elites in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1990, the newly introduced political system institutionalized the tradition in the form of “national-conservative anticommunist” parties on the one hand, and parties identifying themselves as “left-liberal modernizers,” on the other. The inherited antagonism was unfavorable for right-wing parties at the “national” pole, because it hampered them in using the positive tropes of modernization in a new era that Hungarians collectively expected to foster their country’s catching-up with Western welfare democracies.

The old antagonism of modern left and conservative right laid a heavy burden on Fidesz especially, which emerged in 1996 as a new, young right-wing force with the key promise of modernizing the country. Fidesz leaders were right to recognize that the old-style stance focused on nationalism and conservatism would not allow them to gain majoritarian support for their program of modernization. In order to win the sympathy of the middle-ground electorate between the progressive left and the conservative right, Fidesz leaders decided to reshape the political field and to invent a new image that better articulates the widespread popular hope for modernization. In order to channel this hope into politics and connect with people through the promise of change, Fidesz dumped the outdated imagery of nationalist conser-

²¹ As everywhere in the Eastern European periphery, Hungarian intellectual-economic elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries divided themselves into two sharply defined groups: that of progressives (mainly representing the culture of the capitalist market and of self-employed, free-floating intelligentsia) and nationalists (embodying the values of the state, the aristocracy, the church and the military). Importantly, before the Second World War, the clash of forces was not directly transferred into the sphere of politics, which was mostly dominated by nationalist conservative forces in that era.

vatism for a new identity, that of the *polgár*. The figure of the *polgár*, the responsible citizen-entrepreneur of a modern political community, infused fresh values (republican, capitalist, European, future-oriented, modern) into the tired identity of the political right in Hungary.

To understand how Fidesz actors claimed to connect with the *polgárs* of the country and reshaped the left-right cleavage with the aim of conquering the middle ground, it may be worth to evoke again the words of marketing strategist András Wermer.

The so-called “hiding” voter is not willing to make it clear whether she would prefer the right or the left . . . but if there is a marketing strategist, the situation may change for tomorrow. There are other things in the world than the right and the left, and there is a space for shifting these labels and creating new battlegrounds. For example, one in which a “party of the past” is confronting a “party of the future.” And to these labels, people will immediately relate in brand new ways. With new labels, an old party can be transferred to a new box. (Spirk 2005)

This short passage reveals us the very heart of the Fidesz strategy: “connecting” the middle by reconfiguring old polarities in a way that would imbue the right-wing pole with progressive values which are important for the uncommitted center ground. It is with this aim that Fidesz introduced the figure of the *polgár*, and created a new polarization between the *polgárs* and the rest: people of the past, of socialism, Kádár’s people.²² This new polarity was meant to overwrite the old cleavages between nationalism and progress and to turn political controversy to more favorable directions, where the program of modernization is linked to the right. Accordingly, the newly invented contest between the *polgár* right and the (post)socialist left was represented as a historical battle between the future and the past, movement and inertia, strength and weakness, unity and fragmentation, self-responsible agency and docile passivity, a new modern republic and the anomic years of post-Communism. There is no doubt that the endeavor of Fidesz catalyzed huge energies in Hungarian society and created a

²² János Kádár, Hungary’s Communist leader between 1956 and 1988.

modern, New Right identity.²³ But it could not connect and control the elusive middle.

Fidesz was not able to establish a majoritarian support for its *polgár* Hungary vision in 2002. In unraveling the causes of this failure, it is not enough to argue that the campaign was simply not forceful or credible enough. In fact, the “modernist,” marketing-based strategy of mobilizing the middle ground with an attractive, conflict-free, celebratory performance of national recovery was very successful with a certain part of the audience. As we will see, there was a casual middle in 2002 that enthusiastically embraced the Fidesz vision. Thus, if the Fidesz celebratory performance failed, it was not because it entirely missed engaging the casual middle ground. The real limitations of the performance are to be found elsewhere: namely in the fact that Fidesz actors overestimated the size of this middle ground. As I will show, the casual middle successfully mobilized by Fidesz accounted for only 15 percent of the population, instead of the 40 percent that Fidesz targeted. In the following I will explore the problem to reveal not only the vulnerability of a particular Fidesz campaign, but also that of the overall neopopular concept of “the middle ground.”

The discourse of the fifth estate urges political actors to focus on the elusive, disloyal popular audience who would flexibly reconsider their political affiliations in light of the issues and information actually available in the media. These people would constantly monitor how the political supply matches their actual expectations (emanating either from long-term preferences or short-term impulses). There is no doubt that such a middle-ground group did exist in Hungary in 2002, and Fidesz was highly successful in addressing them and winning their sympathies. The problem is that the casual middle ground proved to form a much tinier group than the 40 percent located between the left and

²³ András Wermer died in 2010. In a short obituary, a leading right-wing opinion leader commemorated him in the following way: “If there is no András Wermer, Fidesz does not win in 1998. If Fidesz does not win in 1998, there is no modern, right-wing, *polgár* [*citoyen-bourgeois*] party in Hungary. . . . Wermer was the one who could sell the whole to the voters, connecting the image of Fidesz with the eternal dream of a modernizing *polgár* Hungary” (Rajcsányi 2010).

the right. As I will show in the following, the “casual middle” in 2002 accounted for a mere 15 percent of Hungarian voters. Fidesz politicians were extremely successful in mobilizing this particular voter segment—however, they were unaware of the fact that their campaign was ineffective, and even counterproductive, among the other 25 percent of voters who also belonged to the political middle ground.

Fidesz failed in 2002 because its strategists paid too much attention to the “center ground” between left and right and neglected the fact that, beyond the antagonism of left and right, other politically relevant polarities, and with them other “middles,” may exist in the political space. In the particular context of 2002, two orthogonal, independent classificatory schemes shaped people’s political identifications. The first scheme represented people’s political preferences, the commonsensical opposition of left and right (with a large elusive uncommitted center between the two poles). Fidesz badly needed the support of this uncommitted center, which constituted 40 percent of the electorate, since in the more committed segments, left-leaning voters outnumbered right-leaning ones (35 percent vs. 25 percent). The other axis shaping the political space, by contrast, worked at a latent level, no one being aware of its existing and direct political significance. This second axis related to people’s preferences for news genres. One of its poles contained people interested in conventional, ideological party politics (37 percent of the population), with the other pole contained people who avoid party politics and are interested in the genre of “biopolitical” issues (crime, health, bodily integrity) typically established in commercial TV’s news programs and tabloid news magazines (27 percent of the population). Between the two poles with a relatively clean-cut news genre preference, we find a less committed “middle ground” (36 percent) that has proved the most susceptible to Fidesz’s celebratory performance.

The following table presents the three “news genre preference” groups and the salience that their members attributed (on average) to the four key issue categories (“debate politics,” “celebratory politics,” “biopolitics,” and “social conflicts”).

As Table 3.5 reveals, the two established news genres, conventional “party politics” and biopolitics, were not found to be evenly important in the electorate. The issues representing “debate” politics proved to be relevant only for 37 percent, while the biopolitical issues grabbed the imagination of 27 percent. By contrast, celebratory issues incited a

Table 3.5. The Average Number of Issues Selected as “Personally Important” by the Three Agenda-Perception Groups and by Issue Category

	Agenda-perception groups		
	Interested in party political issues (37%)	No clear issue genre interest (36%)	Interested in biopolitical issues (27%)
DEBATE ISSUES (5) TV debate between PM nominees Special status of ethnic Hungarians Conflict over the Beneš decrees Coalition offer by the extreme right Corruption affair of PM nominee	2.4	0.7	0.7
CELEBRATORY ISSUES (5) Olympic Games referendum Real estate credit PM flies to Boston National Theatre House of Terror	1.8	2.8	1.6
BIOPOLITICAL ISSUES (3) Contaminated imported chicken meat Pedophile murderer Policemen beat homeless	0.5	0.8	2.2
SOCIAL CONFLICTS (2) Insurance company abrogates contracts Nurse strike	0.3	0.7	0.5
Total (5 out of 15 issues)	5	5	5

significant interest in each agenda-perception group. Understandably, the new and innovative rhetorics of celebration resonated with the most among the “middle-ground” audience that watched the news without any coherent issue preference, without focusing much on either of the two established news genres, party politics and tabloid biopolitics.

In 2001–2, the left-right axis and the news genre preference axis represented the two key dimensions that together determined the political space in which the Fidesz celebratory campaign could exert its mobilizing power. None of two classificatory schemes could entirely

impose themselves on the whole population: both left a wide space open for “middle-ground” people who did not attach themselves to either poles. However, the two “middle grounds” did not coincide at all, since the two axes proved to be rather independent.

As Table 3.6 reveals, the middle between left and right could hardly be called “casual” or “elusive” in its news genre preference. The 40 percent group of middle-ground voters was composed of a large segment of people with a well-crystallized interest in conventional party-political issues and debates (13.5 percent of all voters), and another segment of voters with an equally well-anchored interest in biopolitical, tabloid issues (12 percent of all voters). It is only the remaining third of politically unengaged voters (14.5 percent of all voters) that perfectly suited the label “casual middle”—for it is only this segment that was lacking stable preferences both in terms of political preference and news genre preference. This latter segment of middle-ground voters, as we will see, proved to be highly susceptible to the celebratory campaign of Fidesz.

We can turn now to the question of how exactly the opposition of party-political and biopolitical news genre interest interfered with the attempt of Fidesz to reshape the political space along the antagonism of New Right and Old Left and to gain the support of the middle ground in this repolarized space.

As a first step, let us examine how the two oppositions (political preference and news genre preference) shaped the reception of the Olympics campaign that occupied a central place in the celebratory

Table 3.6. Two Undecided Middle-grounds: the Interrelations between People's Political Engagement and News Genre Preference

		News genre preference (% of all voters)			
		Interested in party political issues	Middle-ground	Interested in biopolitical issues	Total
Political engagement	left-wing	13	13	9	35
	middle-ground	13.5	14.5	12	40
	right-wing	11	8	6	25
	Total	37.5	35.5	27	100

performance. The government's initiative to organize the Olympic Games in 2012 was the leading issue in the public opinion: as we have seen, 52 percent of survey respondents selected it among the five most important issues. Although relatively marginal at the media agenda, the Olympics campaign was an unavoidable topic that everybody talked about in early 2002. It was more than a simple media campaign: the government collected citizens' signatures in order to launch a referendum backing the country's application to the International Olympic Committee. Several hundred thousands signed the petition in support of the referendum: people gave their signatures in public places, they were rowing in queues in undergrounds, on squares, and at Fidesz election campaign rallies. In the early and middle period of the election campaign, the initiative in support of Hungary's nomination to host the 2012 Olympic Games appeared in the media and in politics as an unquestioned, common national cause.

In the survey research, I have examined the public opinion about the Olympics campaign with five statements. Respondents were asked to tell how much they agree—on a scale of one to five—with each statement. Some of these statements used a positive tone (“Organizing the Olympics is a big challenge, but we can achieve it if the country joins its forces”), while others were formulated in a more confrontational way (“We have much more urgent problems to resolve than the Olympic Games”). Out of the five statements, I have constructed a common index representing respondents' overall sympathy with the Olympics initiative. The index has been constructed with factor analytical method (principal component analysis), and represents 58 percent of the five statement variables' total variance. The scores of the index range from -1 to +1, -1 representing a radical rejection, +1 representing a full affirmation of the government's initiative. The value 0 represents the mean of all respondents' position (the index is a variable with standard normal distribution).

Table 3.7 reveals that the political middle reacted in highly different ways in the three news genre preference segments. In the segment interested in conventional ideological and party-political issues, the political middle did not lean either to the government or the opposition in judging the Olympics referendum. The opinion of the average middle-ground voter was situated halfway between the left-wing and the right-wing segments. This is not the case, however, in the two other agenda-perception segments. In the group of people with no

*Table 3.7. The Value of the “Olympics Affirmation Index”
in the Key Voter Segments*

		News genre preference			
		Interested in party political issues	Middle-ground	Interested in biopolitical issues	Total
Political engagement	left-wing	-0.54	-0.39	-0.44	-0.46
	middle-ground	0.02	0.33	-0.12	0.09
	right-wing	0.58	0.57	0.53	0.57
	Total	-0.02	0.14	0.07	0

clear news genre preference, the political middle endorsed the Olympics initiative: they sympathized with the government almost as much as did the right-wingers. By contrast, in the segment of those interested in biopolitical issues, the political middle, gravitated toward the opposition. Their overall judgment of the Olympics initiative fell much closer to the opinion of left-wingers than that of the right-wing electorate.

Table 3.7 suggests that the government’s “connecting” strategy played out very well in the common middle ground of the two politically relevant antagonisms (left vs. right, party politics vs. biopolitics), that is, among people with neither clear political and nor clear news issue preferences. This “casual middle,” which comprised 15 percent of the total electorate, was very successfully connected by Fidesz and enthusiastically embraced the government’s vision. Indeed, it can be argued that in the audience fraction with no articulated news genre preference, voters were polarized along the axis of New Right and Old Left exactly in the way as would be expected from the fifth estate’s neo-popular viewpoint: both right-leaning voters and middle-ground voters embraced the celebration of *polgár* Hungary and its most apparent mediatized performances like the Olympics campaign.

What we need to understand is why right-leaning and middle-ground voters could so successfully be articulated into a New Right majority in the group of people with no clear news genre preference, and why such a successful mobilization did not happen among either the party-politically or the biopolitically interested audience.

Table 3.8. Discriminant Functions Explaining the Ideological Affiliation of Voters
(Left-Middle-Right) in the Three News Genre Preference Groups

The underlying variables explaining left-right polarization ...					
... in the audience interested in party politics	... in the middle-ground audience without news genre preference	... in the audience interested in biopolitical issues			
discriminant function 1, 82% of var.	discriminant function 1, 66% of var.	discriminant function 1, 67% of var.			
Nationalist-conservative values	0.52	Approval of PM's flight to Boston to receive an honorary title	0.54	Approval of the Olympics campaign	0.47
Approval of the Olympics campaign	0.51	Approval of the Olympics campaign	0.46	Self-defined liberal	0.45
Approval of PM's flight to Boston to receive an honorary title	0.46	Approval of giving special status to ethnic Hungarians	0.39	Approves the state of economy	0.44
Trust in institutions	0.40	Feels that PSB TV is biased toward the government	-0.31	Trust in institutions	0.37
Alienation	-0.35	Approval of state-subsidized real estate credit	0.30	Interested in politics	0.36
Approval of giving special status to ethnic Hungarians	0.31				

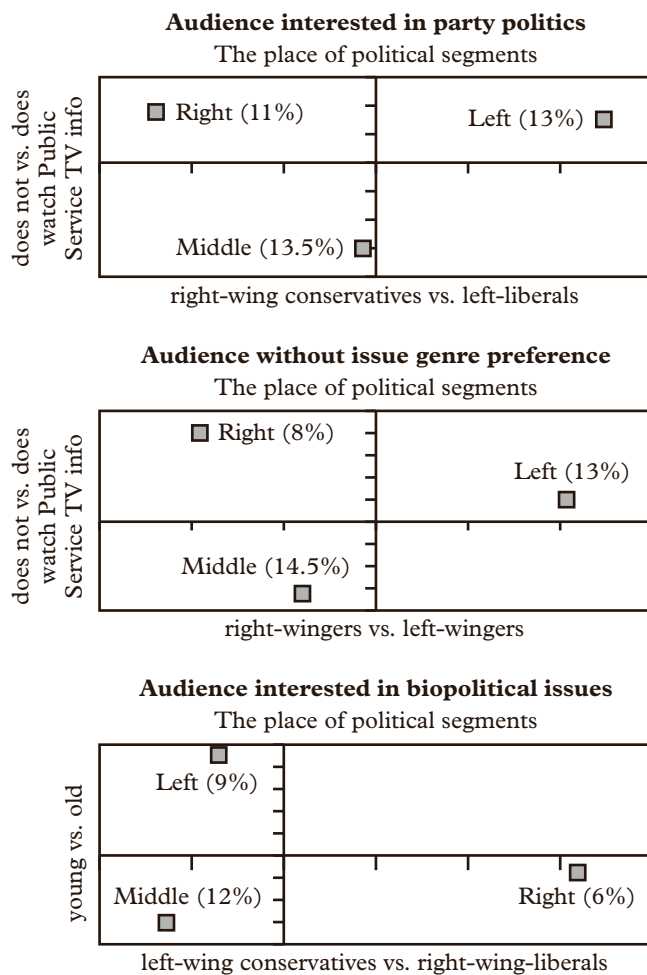
Note: Coefficients displayed represent the correlation of variables with discriminant functions.
For the explanatory variables appearing in Table 3.8., see Appendix.

To answer this question, I have examined the role that celebratory issues have played in the political identity formation of the three news genre preference groups. My aim has been to unravel the hidden symbolic forces propelling the antagonism of left-wing and right-wing voters, and the place of celebratory issues among these forces. In each audience fraction, I have explored the latent factors that urge people to range themselves to the left, to the right, or to the middle. To unravel these factors, I have used the method of discriminant analysis. This statistical method explores how a certain classification (left, middle, right self-classification, in our case) corresponds with a few key variables that prove to be decisive from a large set of potential explanatory variables (attitudes, values, status, and media perception). The method constructs “discriminant functions” (linear combinations of a few “key” variables that are strongly correlated with the discriminant function variable) that explain the maximum possible variance of the independent, categorical variable. Discriminant functions can be interpreted as latent factors, combinations of a set of interrelated variables, which together determine how respondents fall into distinct classes (in our case, classify themselves as left-leaning, right-leaning, or middle ground).

My aim has been to unravel the hidden factors that influence people’s political self-identification. In other words, my question has been what values, opinions, attitudes, and social status features lie at the very heart of the antagonism of left and right in the three audience fractions examined. I have been particularly interested in the role of celebratory issues among the forces propelling the polarization of left and right. I have also laid particular attention to the place of the political middle ground on the latent factor that lies behind the left-right polarity. The very value of discriminant analysis in our case lies in its ability to unravel whether the undecided middle ground leans toward the left-wing or the right-wing electorate, if we consider at the same time all the key variables that propel the political polarization of voters.

In the three news genre preference groups, I have found different attitudes and opinions propelling the antagonism of left and right. Table 3.8 unravels the variables that compose the discriminant functions in each of the three audience groups, and the correlations between variables and discriminant functions. Figure 3.2 unravels where political middle ground voters are located in the space of left-right polarization, in each news genre preference segment.

Figure 3.2. The Place of Right-Wing, Left-Wing, and Middle-Ground Voters in the Political Space Delineated by the Two Main Discriminant Functions in the Three Audience Segments



The value of discriminant functions in group centroids.

	Interested in party politics		Without issue genre preference		Interested in biopolitical issues	
	Function 1	Function 2	Function 1	Function 2	Function 1	Function 2
Left-wing	1.23	0.30	1.03	0.20	-0.35	0.90
Middle	-0.07	-0.60	-0.40	-0.67	-0.63	-0.60
Right-wing	-1.19	0.36	-0.96	0.80	1.60	-0.15

In the audience interested in party-political debates, we find two celebratory issues that played a decisive role in the polarization of left-wing and right-wing voters. The political identity of these voter segments related closely to their judgment of the Olympics campaign and the granting of an honorary doctorate to the prime minister at Tufts University. The very meaning of these celebratory issues for left-wing and right-wing voters may be read out from the other key features propelling the left-right polarization. The most important of these features has been voters' identification with nationalist-conservative values. In the audience interested in conventional party-political controversy, right-wing people fostered nationalist attitudes, placed the value of patriotism above those of proficiency, named belief in God as a key condition of holding public office, and rejected the ideas that nationalism and the Church endanger democracy in Hungary. By contrast, left-wing people felt these threats to exist, and disapproved of the political values of nationalism, patriotism, and religious belief. Consistently to this basic polarity between left and right, the issue of the status law (revolving around the question of national community) also played its role in the identity formation of left-wing and right-wing voter segments. The status law was by far the most important object of the ideological debate between political parties, for it represented well the hundred-year-old conventional clash between the nationalist and conservative right and the cosmopolitan and liberal left.

It is in the space of this traditionally defined antagonism that the Fidesz vision of *polgár* Hungary and national recovery gained its meaning for the audience interested in conventional party politics. Right-wing people could celebrate Fidesz as a force that brought to victory the century-old program of national conservatism by mobilizing the country with initiatives that inspired widespread feelings of national pride. This approval of celebratory politics coupled in the minds of right-wing voters with a high trust in public institutions and a sense of personal empowerment. The identity of left-wing people was based on the negation of nationalism and a disapproval of celebration. Left-leaning voters fostered feelings of distrust and a sense of alienation. On the whole, in the audience interested in conventional party-political debates, the celebratory performance of Fidesz was read as a new, reborn emanation of the old right-wing program of national conservatism. However, this specific understanding of the Fidesz celebratory performance was not

able to mobilize the political middle ground in the audience interested in conventional ideological debates. The undecided voters of this audience group were too familiar with the conventional ideological war between left and right, they knew too well the stakes and meanings of this battle to rally with the government's politics that—in their eyes—did not do more than put an old antagonism into a new costume.

In the audience segment of people without clean-cut issue genre preference, the polarization of left-wingers and right-wingers was driven by very different motives. The key values of conservative nationalism are entirely missing from the features by which the two voter groups distinguish themselves. Neither did right-wingers feel more trustful or more empowered than the left-wing electorate. The only feature opposing the two voter segments was their relation to the high-profile issues of the electoral campaign. Left-wing and right-wing people formed their political identities by following the actual impulses that they received from the media spectacle. The two key celebratory issues, the Olympics initiative and the prime minister's trip to Boston, played a key role in this audience segment, too, just like in the previous one. In addition, a third celebratory issue emerged as a key polarizing factor: right-wingers approved of the newly introduced real estate credit system, while left-wingers opined that it did not bring a real solution to the problems of the young who aspire to have their own home. Beyond these three celebratory issues, status law was the fourth issue significantly contributing to the identity formation of politically engaged citizens in this audience segment. Tellingly enough, the only feature that played a role in the left-right polarization and was not a concrete news issue is the trust in public service television, which in 2001–2 worked as a propagandist arm of the government. In this era, 41 percent of people (38 percent of the casual middle) were aware of the bias of public service television (in answer to an open-ended question, they named PSB TV as a biased channel). In the audience without a clear issue preference, right-wingers not only approved of the government's position in the leading campaign issues, but also appreciated the reliability of public service television's open promotion of the celebratory performance of Fidesz.

In the "elusive middle" with no specific issue genre preference, the difference between left-wing and right-wing voters was reduced to one single dimension: the two segments differed over whether or not the figure of a "strong and attractive government" emerged in their

mind in reaction to the celebratory performance of Fidesz. Celebratory issues proved to be strong and attractive enough to engage the political middle ground. Winning the sympathy of this group has been a huge gain for Fidesz: the “casual middle,” as we have seen earlier, accounted for 14.5 percent of the total electorate.

The third agenda perception group, that of people interested in the genre of biopolitical news, developed a very different understanding about the political identity of Fidesz and the meaning of its celebratory performance. In this audience fraction, just as in the previous two, the issue of the Olympics was a key feature of identity formation. However, the Olympics campaign embodied a sharply different vision about Fidesz and its “*polgár* Hungary” than in the two other audience groups. Among people interested in biopolitical issues, people’s judgment of the Olympics initiative was linked neither to nationalism and nor to their approval of other high-level issues. Instead, right-wing people approving of the Olympics bid were characterized by having a liberal identity and positive expectations about the perspectives of the economy and also their own financial prospects. In a highly unexpected way, a right-wing liberal identification emerged in the particular context of the 2002 campaign, in opposition to the left-wing-conservative engagement of the voters dissatisfied with the government. In this particular articulation of the left-right axis, right-wingers were characterized with high levels of institutional trust and intense political involvement, while left-leaning voters were distrustful and alienated from politics. In this case, Fidesz’s celebration of “*polgár* Hungary” was associated with the idea of the country putting itself in motion, with a republican engagement in the country’s affairs, with the promise of “real socio-economic recovery.”

However, the vision of right-liberal entrepreneur “*polgárs*” proved to be totally repulsive for the political middle ground. Strangely enough, politically undecided voters rejected this celebratory vision with a higher degree of antipathy than left-wing voters themselves. The audience concerned with biopolitical issues understood the antagonism of the government and its opposition in a way that mounted impenetrable walls between Fidesz and the political middle ground. There are good reasons to suppose that people who watch news through biopolitical lenses are particularly susceptible to the personal, often physical, experience of endangerment in which people lived their lives in post-communist Hungary. With their concerns about people’s physical and

mental integrity, the biopolitically interested might also be more aware of the limited sovereignty of individuals to take their destiny into their hands. Here lies the reason why the majority of those interested in biopolitics regarded the articulation of a right-liberal “*polgár*” politics with so much antipathy. The middle ground in this audience segment felt that the right-liberal ethos of entrepreneurship was at odds with the actual opportunities of those who did not have fortunes to seek.

6.4. Discussion: Selectivity, Repolarization, and Audience Partitioning

Why did the Fidesz celebratory performance fail to establish majority support in spite of all its successes? These successes include: it had effectively silenced the voice of the opposition, that most voters found celebratory issues to bear (out of all the issues on the political agenda in early 2002) the highest relevance to their personal lives, and the voters clearly perceived celebratory issues as interconnected and representing a new form of doing politics. Why, with such a successful performance, was it unable to maintain the coherence of its central vision of *polgár* Hungary? How is it possible that the different layers of *polgárness* were dissociated into incompatible images that exclusively dominated the understanding of political antagonism in the three news genre preference groups?

The commonsensical modernist explanation would most probably conclude that this time, the audience had more power than Fidesz to “bend” the campaign, as Jay Blumler would put it, “to its own purpose” (see Part 2 of this book). Indeed, at first sight, the fact that the *polgár* performance was interpreted so differently by three audience groups might be seen as another illustration of how selective audiences may evade or resist a media text that they find irrelevant or deceptive, lacking “connecting power.” However, this would be a misleading and simplistic interpretation.

The *polgár* performance did not fail because, as the often-heard dictum of audience researchers would suggest, the three audience groups relied on different cultural reservoirs and life experiences and distilled their own meaning from the polysemic text of the campaign. The three news perception groups were more like random crowds of

individuals than like audience tribes or segments standing on shared cultural or experiential ground—this explains the variation of their readings. Unlike audience segments, subcultures, or tribes, the three news perception groups hardly differed in their social or cultural profiles; their members were connected by a single common factor: their personal interest in certain news issues. If the three news perception groups—party political, biopolitical, and casual—polarized themselves in different ways, this is not to be explained by their shared, group-specific cultural or experiential background.²⁴

Instead of a one-size-fits-all, universal explanation, I will propose that the three distinct forms of political polarization taking place in the three news genre preference groups make a case for three theoretical models. Two of these (polarizations and corresponding models) perfectly fit the modernist, neopopular discourse.

People in the party-political group were polarized in accordance to modernist theories of audience selectivity: the *polgár* performance did not repolarize the political space, just reinforced and perhaps activated old standing political dispositions of national conservatives and of leftist

²⁴ The three news perception groups can hardly be likened either to subcultures or interpretive communities or consumer segments. People in these three groups could hardly be attributed with a shared experiential background that would explain the observed variation of their sense making in a similar way as the life experience of, say, unemployed blacks or blue-collar workers explains how they react to politics or media. It would be a mistake, then, to explain the different visions of political antagonism of the three groups only with regard to the inner qualities of the groups themselves.

The group interested in party-political issues was slightly more educated than the two others, but this was the only status difference with any significance. The only considerable difference between the three groups lay in the somewhat tautological finding that the group interested in party-political battles was also more interested and involved in politics in general than the two other news perception groups.

Meanwhile, people interested in tabloid, biopolitical issues were no less interested in politics than the people belonging to the casual news agenda perception group. The group interested in biopolitical issues did not differ at all from the casual news perception group, and neither of them differed from the social average in age, income, education, or habitat. People with a casual or biopolitical news interest formed a huge, heterogeneous, majoritarian mainstream audience—and it is the ambiguous reaction of this audience that explains the failure of the New Right in Hungary in 2002.

liberals. The most important consequence of this for Fidesz was that, in the party-politically interested segment, the vision of *polgár* Hungary brought nothing new that could have changed the mind of the ideologically uncommitted middle ground and opened a new platform for a new right-wing identification. People in the uncommitted middle kept the distance that separated them from the right and the left. People in the left, the right and the middle behaved as selective media users with clean-cut preferences.

By contrast, in the group without clear news genre preference, the celebratory issues representing the identity of the New Right have been clearly able to mobilize the politically elusive middle ground. In this segment, Fidesz was able, with the symbolic force of its mediatized celebratory performance, to overwrite people's pre-given dispositions, to enchant the politically uncommitted middle ground, and to repolarize the political space into a New Right majority and an Old Left minority. The *polgár* campaign was highly effective in this group, corroborating modernist theories of strong media/campaign effects.

In the two audience segments, the trends of political polarization played out in accordance with the two most typical, competing modernist theories (strong effects vs. audience selectivity). No surprise that both tendencies of political polarization have been fully compatible with Fidesz's neopopular campaign strategy. In the segment of politically interested and informed voters, the *polgár* performance may have failed to push the political middle toward the right—however, this was clearly not its purpose. Persuading politically interested voters who are involved in parties' long standing ideological battles is an impossibly hard job, according to the modernist tradition. The celebration of *polgár* Hungary was meant to build a majority from the politically less interested mainstream audience, and mainly its uncommitted segments who were looking for plausible anchor points and new hopes for a better future. And in this segment, the celebratory performance has been a sweeping triumph. Had the two audience groups constituted the totality of the electorate, Fidesz would have won the elections, and the campaign could be seen as a demonstration of how the systemic rules of the mediatized politics can be exploited by the fifth estate's neopopular strategies to "connect" the popular audience.

However, the third, biopolitically interested group has refuted both modernist models. This mainstream audience group has been dissoci-

ated from the other part of mainstream audience (people with no news genre preference) and polarized itself in a totally unexpected way.

In the biopolitically interested group, the *polgár* vision of the New Right represented an ethos of right-liberal entrepreneurship that celebrates the agency of the “*citoyen-bourgeois*.” For the right-leaning voters of this audience group, the *polgár* vision meant a chance to take an active part in the recovering economy, and to get rid of the paralytic culture that opposes innovative reform and sticks to the postcommunist status quo represented by the Socialist party. This quasi-neoliberal vision of the entrepreneurial citizen was not a priori alien to the ideology of Fidesz at the time—however, the fact that this vision emerged (even if in a rather inarticulate form) and started to dominate the image of Fidesz among biopolitically interested people was certainly unexpected and unfavorable to the party. People interested in biopolitics identified the New Right with the image of the state-supported liberal entrepreneur. Given the symbolic power and populist appeal of the *polgár* performance, biopolitically interested people formed their political affiliations by reacting (affirmatively or negatively) to the entrepreneurial image.

Thus, in the biopolitically interested group, the celebratory performance of *polgár* Hungary could powerfully repolarize the political space: it incited a mass-scale reaction, propelled by a right-liberal entrepreneurial interpretation of *polgárness* and its left-conservative, anomic rejection. In this repolarized space, the uncommitted middle ground rallied with left-leaning people and sharply rejected the entrepreneurial imagery of *polgárness* that they found repulsive as a role model or a point of identification. The performance of *polgár* Hungary, with its constant and strong references to activity, mobilization, development, and recovery interfered with the affinities of middle-ground people who had biopolitical concerns with the personal integrity and sovereign agency of the individual.

The temporary rise of this repolarized space was not only unexpected, but it also remained entirely hidden from the eyes of political actors and experts. No political actor tried to exploit this right-liberal image of *polgár* Hungary, either affirmatively or critically. The repolarization of the political space emerged as the result of a coincidental interference between people’s attachments to two strong and enchanting media impulses: the biopolitical address of commercial TV

channels and the mediatized campaign of the New Right in the actual context of 2002. The uniqueness and the latency of the repolarization process has been a unique historic coincidence which calls for a non-modernist explanation (see Table 3.9).

The complex effects that Fidesz's performance brought on the biopolitical group can hardly be described with modernist concepts of media power or audience power—for what we have to deal with here is a strange interference of the two. By interfering with the biopolitical agenda of popular media and the popular audience, the celebratory performance of Fidesz created a secluded audience fraction, a heterogeneous crowd of individuals who, starting from their shared biopolitical concerns, developed a common image of the New Right. In other words, the interference created an aesthetic, dramaturgical force field which “entrapped” biopolitically interested people who developed—individually, but following their “shared dramaturgical sensibilities” (Condit 1989)—a very particular vision about the political antagonism of left and right.

I propose to grasp with the term “audience partitioning” the scenario, in which the impulses of a strong media performance temporarily enclose a crowd into a secluded experiential space. This is what the *polgár* performance did in 2002: it left unaffected the identifications of politically interested people, but at the same time it forcefully “partitioned” the remaining mainstream audience to two heterogeneous crowds. In one of these, the connecting and polarizing power of the performance could freely flow, while in the other, the same symbolic power malfunctioned and, unobserved, mispolarized the audience.

The celebratory performance of *polgár* Hungary may rightly be seen as a textbook case of political mobilization orchestrated from the modernist playbook of the fifth estate. The performance was aimed at establishing a political majority for the New Right, which means to “connect” the elusive, uncommitted middle ground with its innovative and celebratory vision, to cement it together with the ideologically committed spectrum of the electorate, and to create a mobilizable political community. However, the *polgár* performance brought a highly ambiguous double effect: it successfully repolarized the political space and mobilized the popular middle ground in a certain part of the mainstream audience, while it also mispolarized the audience and

Table 3.9. Three Separate Mechanisms of Political Mobilization

	Audience section interested in party-political issues	Audience section without clear news genre preference	Audience section interested in biopolitical issues
Sociocultural background	Slightly more educated, interested in politics, ideologically embedded voters	Average, heterogeneous crowd	Average, heterogeneous crowd
Meaning of left vs. right antagonism	National right-wing conservatives versus progressivist left-liberals	Right-wing fans versus left-wing haters of the celebration of national recovery	Right-liberal entrepreneurs versus paralyzed leftist conservatives
The meaning of the political antagonism emerging in the group is...	... apparent for political actors who refer to this type of antagonism	... apparent for political actors who refer to this type of antagonism	... latent, unseen, unreflected on by actors
Political polarization in the group was driven by...	... voters' preexisting affiliations	... media and campaign impulses	... media and campaign impulses
Did the political antagonism emerging in the group repolarize political space?	No (replaying old polarization)	Yes (effective repolarization)	Yes (counter-productive mispolarization)
Did the political antagonism emerging in the group help Fidesz to mobilize the middle ground?	No (the status of the middle ground remained unaffected)	Yes (the new antagonism created by the campaign successfully mobilized the middle ground)	No (the new antagonism created by the campaign alienated the middle ground)
The (lack of) repolarization and middle-ground mobilization were...	... expected and did not contradict Fidesz's campaign strategy	... expected and perfectly fitted Fidesz's campaign strategy	... unexpected and contradicted Fidesz's campaign strategy
How the findings fit modernist theories about the rules of popular connection?	Modernist connection rules worked as predicted by theories of selective perception	Modernist connection rules worked as predicted by theories of strong media effects	Modernist connection rules did not work, calling for new, "amodern" theories

alienated the middle ground in another mainstream audience fraction. (While it—predictably—left unaffected the political space in the politically involved audience segment.)

Instead of simply mobilizing the mainstream popular audience that its orchestrators had targeted, the *polgár* performance “partitioned” this audience into two secluded crowds. Reacting to the *polgár* campaign, the two mainstream audience fractions developed entirely different understandings of the antagonism that it represented and mobilized themselves in entirely different ways—in spite of the fact that the two crowds did not differ in any aspect of their sociocultural background or media exposure.

The “partitioning” of the audience was directly caused by the symbolic force of Fidesz’s performance that interfered with the biopolitical address of commercial televisions. Due to this interference, a secluded audience fraction emerged from individuals whose shared biopolitical concerns—which usually do not have a direct political relevance—started to matter politically. Biopolitically interested individuals reacted to the celebratory performance individually, but in a concerted way since they were driven by their shared biopolitical concerns and sensibilities. Following these affinities, which unexpectedly started to matter in the context of the campaign, biopolitically interested people developed a shared vision about the political space, which they saw to be polarized along the opposition of right-liberal entrepreneurship and left-conservative apathy. This unexpected “mispolarization” of left-leaning and right-leaning people in the biopolitically interested segment contradicts the modernist, neopopular concepts on the rules of “liquid control” and popular connection.

This incongruence, however, does not mean at all that modernist models would have entirely misunderstood these rules. The “neopopular” discourse informing the *polgár* campaign was not totally mistaken and unsuccessful: the campaign worked perfectly in a certain part of the mainstream audience. The neopopular strategy of targeting and mobilizing the “middle ground” has proved to work perfectly, but in a narrower space than its proponents expected. This case suggests that the neopopular discourse is plausible and reasonable but it is unable to reflect on its structural limitations, on the fact that it cannot serve as a universal model. This particular case forcefully illustrates the key critical claim of this book, namely that the dysfunctions of the modernist,

neopopular discourse do not stem from its being false, but its resistance to falsification: the fact that with its self-universalizing force, it makes it impossible to separate where it is valid and where it is not, what are the limits beyond which it works counterproductively.

The fact that biopolitically interested audiences developed a secluded vision of political antagonism reveals the limits of the neopopular discourse. The partitioning and mispolarization of the biopolitical audience demonstrates the possibility that in the late modern media space, performances orchestrated according to the modernist rules of connection making may inadvertently create situations which suspend the very same rules. These situations are exceptional in the sense that they suspend the “normal” rules of mediatized politics: they foster collective sense making by their inner dramaturgical force which equally differs from the mobilizing force of (popular) persuasion (envisioned by modernist models of strong media effects) and from the filtering force of pregiven audience dispositions (stressed by modernist models of audience selectivity).

The “exceptionality” grants an eventlike character to the presented case which, in the particular context of the 2002 elections, has “suspended” the commonly accepted “normal” rules of popular connection and control in mediatized politics. By grasping the mispolarization as a disruptive “event,” we may argue that biopolitically interested people, following the hints of the *polgár* performance and those of their favorite biopolitical issues (and the programs covering them), unnoticed, “fell hostage” to a dramaturgical, aesthetic force field in which they commonsensically cultivated a very particular vision about the political antagonism of right and left.

The biopolitically interested audience fraction, arguably, formed temporarily an “enclave” in which the commonly envisioned systemic rules of “liquid control”—the “laws” of popularity—did not work. The rise of this “enclave” was a direct side product of the fifth estate-driven, modernist efforts to connect the elusive audience with an irresistibly “popular” performance. The mass-scale, collective reinterpretation of political antagonism in the biopolitical group was an unintended and widely neglected consequence of Fidesz’s populist efforts for “connecting” the popular audience—and also a very consequential one with regard to election results. The fate of the *polgár* performance was that it inadvertently triggered, with its populist “connecting” force, an event-

like, exceptional process of mispolarization—and, thus, it collapsed under the weight of its own symbolic power.

These types of exceptional, enclavelike, self-driven situations represent a prime interruptive force in late modern media, and will be theorized in the next chapter as “latent events.” They are “latent” because they are so much incompatible with the modernist, neopopular discourse which produces them that they typically stay “under the radar” of all observers.

Chapter 7

Latent Events in a Postnormal Media Environment

In 2002, the modernist, neopopular strategy of Fidesz to “connect” middle-ground voters with irrefutable issues celebrating national recovery ended up in inciting an unexpected event: the dissociation of a mainstream audience “fraction” and its enclavelike experiential space, where the polarizing force of the celebratory performance triggered a new antagonism that was very unfavorable for the performers. The temporary emergence of this particular experiential space may well be read as a disruptive event, since it suspended the general (modernist) rules of “popular connection and control” and unleashed obscure and unrecognized mechanisms of public opinion formation. The celebratory performance of *polgár* Hungary is an apparent example of how the modernist neopopular discourse may trigger “latent events” which tacitly but powerfully disrupt the coherence of the “normal,” rule-governed media landscape that the same discourse envisions and tries to exploit.

The exceptional and temporary emergence of an experiential “situation” will be theorized in the following as a “latent event.” Latent events signal a new mode of existence for interruptive events in today’s mediatized political environment, in which actors overwhelmingly follow speculative strategies of connecting and controlling the popular media audience. This emerging environment is shaped by excessive neopopular speculation that triggers “abnormal” situations which—like in the above case—undermine the rules envisioned by speculators without the latter being aware of it. This latency results from the

“counterperformativity” and unfalsifiability of the neopopular speculative process which makes it impossible to tell “on the fly” whether actors act in a “normal time” when the modernist/neopopular rules of “liquid control” apply or in an “exceptional time” when the same rules are suspended and counterproductive to follow. This is exactly what Fidesz actors encountered in 2002: in one of the two mainstream “crowds,” their neopopular celebratory performance mobilized the “popular middle ground” with stunning success, meanwhile, in the background, a very different pattern of collective mobilization emerged in another mainstream crowd and undermined the *polgár* performance, without performers being aware of this rule-defying “abnormality.” The intermingling of rule-governed “normality” and rule-suspending “abnormality” due to excessive speculation will be theorized as the “postnormal” condition of popular media and mediatized politics.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. The first section argues that excessive speculation on “connecting” the popular media audience necessarily leads to the proliferation of eventlike contents. The second section argues that in this heavily eventized environment, the status of interruptive events becomes uncertain, and established theories of events can hardly catch up with this change. The third section introduces the theory of latent events which reconceives how disruptive events work in an event-saturated environment. The last section theorizes the “postnormal” condition of this media environment.

7.1. Neopopular Speculation and Media Eventization

Media and political actors’ “neopopular” race to control their audiences through popular connections/resonances has triggered an extreme overproduction of event-like, exceptional impulses in the late modern media space. This is due to the fact that actors have increasingly sought to connect their audiences through highly resonant, event-like impulses that sweep across the multichannel media landscape and tie the fragmented media horizons of an increasingly “unavailable” audience. As I will argue, the popular resonance-making practices of “liquid control” have primarily focused on creating popular events, on triggering and exploiting exceptional moments in the cultural experience of media audiences.

The neopopular strategy of connecting people through events has been “mythical,” which does not mean (as I have stressed many times in this book) that it has been entirely false. The rise of a multi-channel system after the end of the broadcast age has inevitably transformed the strategies of mainstream actors in media and politics, and if multiplatform media events have assumed a key role in these transformed strategies, this has partly been by inevitable systemic necessity. These systemic necessities do exist—even if neopopular interpreters tend to aggrandize them into universal and unfalsifiable myths. Partly necessary, partly speculative—the eventization process described in the following needs to be seen as a deeply ambiguous, schizophrenic process—in the same spirit as the other transformations like the medi- atization of politics (Chapter 1) or postcommunist media transition (introduction to Part 3) or postbureaucratic media change (Chapter 2) have been discussed in this book.

In a forgotten passage of *Media Events*, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz forecast the eventization process that occupies me in this chapter. “Media events preview the future of television,” they claimed. “[A]s the new media technology multiplies the number of channels, television will become a medium of segmentation and television-as-we-know-it will disappear” (1992, 23). The reader faces a double anticipation here: that the genre of media event will not fall together with broadcast television and, even more importantly, that the pertinence of media events will counterweigh the dissolution of broadcasting and the fragmentation of media. Twenty years later, it is clear that most media producers, public actors, and media experts have come to the same conclusion as Dayan and Katz. As a growing number of researchers have pointed out, media actors in the last two decades have increasingly relied on media events in their strategies to get along in the highly complex ecology of late modern media (Caldwell 1996, 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2002; Kim and Park 2008; Couldry, Hepp, and Krotz 2010; Auslander 2008). Media and public actors, in their attempts to establish temporary control over an increasingly fragmented and competitive media market, have invested much effort into generating “multi-platform media events” (Roscoe 2004) and “multi-platformable media brands” (Murray 2003) which can achieve widespread visibility by sweeping across the whole media field. The structural consequence of these strategies has been the intense “eventization” of popular media and the

resulting emergence of “event television” (Caldwell 1996; Hesmondhalgh 2002; Roscoe 2004).

The point where a necessary systemic adaptation has switched to speculative eventization may be located in the gradual conversion of the media event from a distinct televisual genre (Dayan and Katz 1992, 9) to a ubiquitous organizing principle. The conversion means that media actors have not settled for exploiting media events (that would occur spontaneously), instead, they have increasingly conferred the status of event to all kinds of allegedly popular occurrences that they found to have a “connecting” potential. Indeed, media and public actors today would qualify as an exploitable event any occurrence with a potential of “connecting” (engaging, attracting, etc.) the audience: the season opener of a TV series, the final and semi-finals of a reality program (Couldry 2002), an erupting scandal that floods all media gates at the same time (Liebes and Blondheim 2005; Delli Carpini and Williams 2001), the actual upward “momentum” of a party (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999) that can incessantly be commented upon, political studio debates that are regularly promoted as “political events” on their own (Cayrol 1986, 138), the sudden popularity loss of a political candidate struggling for reelection, and so on.

As practices of popular connection have merged with those of event making, and actors have aimed at connecting and controlling people through popular media events in the first place, a very “torrent,” to use Todd Gitlin’s word, of eventized instances has emerged, which have been deliberately performed and promoted as exceptional and unprecedented and rule breaking. These quasi-interruptive instances have become routine, as various researchers have observed, in the last two decades: “formula-breaking” programming has become the rule (Jancovich and Lyons 2003; Caldwell 2004), “derailment and disruption” have become the new rituals of postbroadcast television (Dayan 2010), journalists and gatekeepers have lost control (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004) over the regular contagion of aggressive media “frenzies” (Sabato 1991). The journalists’ strategy of “running with the pack”—that is, covering the exceptional breakout story that “everybody else is covering” (Liebes and Blum-Kulka 2004, 1168)—has become routine, producing an impoverished environment in which the same banal details of the breakout event are incessantly reiterated every quarter of the hour on the news channels. An eloquent example has

been the newly emerging TV genre of “disaster marathons,” regular live broadcasts covering terrorist attacks in Israel (Liebes and Kampf 2007). These live transmissions that had been supposed to present the tragedy and turmoil caused by suicide attacks got banalized into scripted “reality shows,” “polished, well-established routine” programs, that are hardly able to stop the time and present themselves as truly extraordinary (109).

The intense strategies of “eventization” have freed media events from the quarantine of extraordinary moments into which the former logic of broadcast television had enclosed them (Dayan and Katz 1992), however, the same strategies have also banalized events and dissolved their contours. Media events today, widely dissipated in the “ordinary” media landscape, can hardly create the collective sense of exceptionality that once characterized them. Late modern media events have lost their outstanding status and have been pushed into a paradoxical, in-between position, neither routine, nor extraordinary, open to various conflicting interpretations regarding their collective relevance. Due to the general trends of routinized event making at all levels, popular media today seem to “socialize us . . . to a norm of interruption rather than schedule” (Katz and Liebes 2007, 159). This idea of media being a socializing agent to a norm of interruption wonderfully expresses the schizophrenic state in which actors and observers of today’s mediatized society live.

Key to the above schizophrenic state is an indeterminate oscillation between normal and abnormal, a growing uncertainty regarding what counts to be ordinary and extraordinary. The widespread strategies of eventization created a twilight zone between ordinary, normal news and exceptional, abnormal events (Csigó 2010, Dayan 2010). This twilight zone of “routinized interruption” represents the media space in which today’s politicians try to connect their voters. In today’s politics, the conventionally felt difference between political “business as usual” and Watergate-like, “out-of-time” political dramas disappear. The mediatized political process is in a permanent limbo in the twilight zone between routine and liminality, ordinariness and extraordinariness, engagement and apathy. (The infamous Monicagate was arguably one of the first, paradigm-setting emanations of the new status quo of a crisis and scandal-ridden politics that is routinely enmeshed in a state of permanent exceptionality—neither normal, nor abnormal, but “postnormal.”)

My point in this section is that the eventized twilight zone has emerged less from the objective necessities of the postbroadcast media system than actors' speculative race for "popular connection." While there is no reason to reject the idea that the systemic pressures of a multiplatform media environment make media events prime capitalizable assets, it is much more questionable that the excessive eventization of all "connecting" attempts would also reflect systemic necessities. It is more reasonable to grasp eventization as a mythical solution to the inner contradictions of "popular connection" in the context of mediatized competition for popular media audiences. In this context, the "new rules" of popular connection that the modernist discourse has envisioned are always at the risk of becoming irrelevant—and this is what is veiled by the aggressive intensification and eventization of connecting attempts.

In the multiplatform media environment of late capitalist society, "connecting" people does not simply mean establishing a resonant harmony with them, but, first and foremost, outshining other actors in a popularity contest. In such a context, all contenders offer "popular" products, which obscures the very notion of popularity. The contest of popular products turns popularity from an absolute value that is defined in opposition to its nonpopular antipodes (like elite, alien, complex, etc.) into a relative notion of something being "more popular" than other, "less popular" products. In this context, the "orthodox" modernist notions on the popular (the basic question of what the people need and want) inevitably lose their contours. Of course, on an abstract level, it is still quite clear that popular audiences broadly tend to respond to impulses which are simple, attractive, familiar, personally relevant, or morally unambiguous. However, these populist imperatives lose much of their relevance once all actors apply them at the same time.

The modernist discourse on the popular was born in the nineteenth century when the popular was a subordinate, outside category that was defined in opposition to the values of the legitimate "normality" of the time. By contrast, today, when actors' racing for the applause of the people has become normality, the main stake of the race for "popular representation" has been transformed into who is able to express the people's will in the most intense, innovative, attractive form. This encloses public actors in a paradoxical trap, namely that

they have to act by the imperatives of “popular connection” (be simple, accessible, familiar), while they are also aware of the fact that these imperatives can hardly guarantee success in themselves. To this felt uncertainty, actors react by intensifying their performances by trying to distinguish their “connecting” attempts from their competitors’ less popular connecting strategies. Indeed, it is as if the systemic imperatives attributed to popular media could only work with an intensifier: what actors relentlessly strive for is not simply making their performances “popular,” but making them “even more” popular, “exceptionally” catchy, “unprecedentedly” innovative and genuine. Accordingly, each actor has to position their actual performance as a unique voice, as an interruptive instance, and, in addition, they must try to outdo not only others’ but also their own past connecting strategies. In the contest of mutual outbidding, public actors cannot content themselves with enacting a populist harmony with people: they permanently reformulate this “familiar” harmony in new and yet “unfamiliar” forms.

In the speculative race for “popular connection,” no one can escape the tense dialectics of the familiar and the exceptional. All attempts to “connect” are encumbered with the potential of interruption: they aim to create populist harmony and they are positioned as exceptional, eventlike instances that suspend the familiar ways of harmony making. In the name of “connecting” the popular audience, fifth estate experts have, in fact, triggered exceptional, unfamiliar impulses which inevitably risk breaking the populist harmony that they promise to establish.

7.2. Eventization and Theories of Liminality, Spectacle, and Catharsis

The routine production of allegedly exceptional events raises a question of key importance: are there still interruptive events today that are able to abort or suspend the machinery of eventization? Can the routine of interruption itself be interrupted? And what instance could break the flow of allegedly interruptive events?

The most common modernist answer to this question has been given by media spectacle theorists who have argued that the eventization of media has killed the individual event. Accordingly, as events

have been multiplied and intensified, they have lost their interruptive force and become the peak points and embodiments of the spectacular logic of event making that dominates the commercialized media landscape. The spectacle argument forcefully and plausibly reperforms the modernist myths of a “popular,” “rule-governed,” “transparent” media universe. It reinforces the overall mythical belief that today’s media and politics are exposed to inescapable systemic imperatives (of spectacle making) that define how to connect and control the audience in the “popular” media space. No doubt, the concept of spectacle is a forceful metaphor of “liquid control.”

Interruptive events are a vital question for this book, for if they still exist, this means that the systemic logic of popular connection and control envisioned by modernist experts are not universal. If interruptive events exist, they can disprove the overhyped modernist myth that the mechanisms of “liquid control” work by universal and inescapable rules which make themselves self-evidently visible in the most apparent instances of popular connection.

As my analysis of a “latent event” in Chapter 6 forecasts, I believe that interruptive events do exist, but in a different form than disruptive events existed in the broadcast age. We need new approaches to interruptive events. Arguably, if we stick too much to the classical models of interruptive events or social dramas (that have famously grasped events as “liminal breaks” in everyday routine), if we try to actualize them in the hope of unraveling some faded but still existing forces of collective mobilization in the twenty-first-century context when events are anything but liminal breaks, we can hardly develop a forceful challenge to modernist spectacle theories.¹

My model of “latent events” (see next section) offers a more forceful approach to grasp today’s new mode of existence of interruptive events. Before introducing it, I will shortly present those estab-

¹ Such a “neo-orthodox” solution, I will argue, would lead us dangerously close to the modernist discourse, which would keep our “new” model of interruptive events in a subordinate position that is bound to lose to mainstream modernist theories (in this case, spectacle theory). Earlier in this book, I have criticized such scenarios (and pointed to the limits of orthodox normative critique of mediatized populist democracy and the weakness of orthodox leftism in economic thinking [see the introduction and Chapter 3]).

lished theoretical positions I will contrast “latent events” with. These three positions—*liminality*, *spectacle*, and *catharsis*—grasp inadequately (although for very different reasons) the interruptive forces of event-formation in the late modern media environment.

THEORIZING OUT-OF-TIME EVENTS: THE LIMINAL MODEL

The Event, as an observable phenomenon and a concept, has for long carried an “amodern” potential, that has been played out by various scholarly attempts to refine and improve mainstream, modernist notions of media power and audience power.² Turning to “extra-ordinary” events has promised to reveal insights into a sacred time of turbulence, when the crystallized power circuits typical to modern media are suspended. The energies released by events have been found to dissolve the burdens that had been erected—in the practice of making and studying popular media equally—by the “binary-producing machine” of modernism (Grossberg 1996, 94). Unquestionably, the opposition of “producers” and “consumers,” of “subordinate” and “resistant” registers of use, of top-down “power” and bottom-up “agency” seems rigid and artificial in times of emotional turbulence, when audiences and performers “fuse” (Alexander 2006b) and jointly engage in “concerts of performances” (Dayan and Katz 1992). Such an understanding of events as higher-than-ordinary, heightened dramas or ceremonies (see also Jacobs 1996; Cottle 2006; Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006) has an incomparable potential to grasp power flows from an “amodern” perspective.

Research has focused on outstanding media events and dramas that temporarily suspend ordinary media reality and invite media users to leave behind their ordinary cultural habits, to assume a participatory role in a heightened communal performance. The idea has strongly relied on the anthropologically inspired concept of “liminality,” referring to periods of turmoil when ordinary social life is temporarily suspended, people secede from their lifeworlds and assemble in great numbers to collectively question the established cultural order and reestablish it in a renewed form (Turner 1975). Liminal processes have

² For a similar argument on ritual, see Cottle 2006.

been suggested to take place in out-of-time, out-of-the-ordinary contexts which bracket off established structures and practices. Although the original idea referred to physical gatherings, researchers of modern popular culture—Victor Turner himself among them—have broadened its scope to mediated performances. Liminal media performances, which find their physical antecedents in theater attendance, political demonstrations, or religious rituals, have been thought to forge a temporary “breach” in the normal course of media production and usage and invite audiences to participate in a heightened drama or ritual.

The idea of “breach”—a break that interrupts and suspends crystallized structures and practices and opens the door for an ongoing, live process—has greatly informed the classical liminal theory of media events and mediated social dramas. Researchers have primarily been interested in the disruptive and creative power of collective participation in ongoing live performances. Accordingly, outstanding media events and dramas have been primarily grasped as live performances (with actors, dramatic plot, and *mise-en-scène*) played on the media stage and attended by audiences. The live, ongoing process of media events and dramas, classical research has suggested, solicits spirals of mutual influence between media actors and audiences. Accordingly, throughout their interaction, the attending audience would voluntarily let itself be influenced by the aesthetic power of performers (by willingly “suspending disbelief”), and in turn, would actively influence the course of the media performance itself (by actively serving as a live mirror, the reflections of which feed actors with constant feedback about their performance).

Due to mutual influence, research has suggested, the course of a live performance is not determined either by preplanned media strategies or preexisting audience dispositions. Live performances have a cultural power of their own. They are not prestructured; on the contrary, they activate a particular plot structure that emerges only in unique, outstanding cases. This autonomous plot structure (rather than the structures of media production or audience affinities) defines the course of outstanding events, which are typically marked as a period of separation (Turner 1969, 94–95). They start with a moment of “break” in the routine (Lull and Hinerman 1997, 3) and a heightened ritual “invitation” to gather (Dayan and Katz 1992, 119), and if they are successful, they may result in the “fusion” of performer and audience (Alexander

2006b, 34, 54), the “restitution” of normality, and the “reaggregation” of community (see Alexander and Jacobs 1998, 37). Most importantly, in the live, ongoing flow of media performance, actors and spectators must mutually attune themselves to each others’ heartbeats—and it is only due to this fusion or “mutual accommodation” (Dayan and Katz 1992, 227) that they can get to new heights, produce new qualities, and destabilize (and then recreate) social order. Accordingly, the “mutual attunement” has facilitated the successful resolution of the Watergate drama and the opening of a new political era (Alexander 1988). Meanwhile, the lack of such attunement led to the failure of the Aldo Moro kidnapping drama, and the further sharpening of the toxic conflicts in Italian political life (Wagner-Pacifici 1986).

This argument suggests that in the fuzzy, out-of-time context of a liminal performance the key modernist question of “Who controls whom?” loses its relevance. Indeed, out-of-time events or dramas bracket off exactly those preexisting structural or individual factors to which modernist researchers have pointed when answering the question of “Who controls whom?” In a liminal time, interactions between actors multiply, ordinary roles and rules temporarily mould, and actors coalesce in a heightened, coproductive process that propels itself by its own force. In media research, the self-propelled, relatively autonomous, coproductive cultural processes have been grasped as equally independent from the flows of top-down media power and bottom-up audience power. This twofold autonomy has been seen to emanate from events’ ability to create an exceptional time of heightened communal experience and, consequently, to suspend the “ordinary” determinations binding people from the top (the everyday power of media industries over consumers) and from the bottom (the force of established local or individual cultural practices and dispositions). This double independence has been thought to enable media events to affect their audience in their own unique way. According to this classical approach, exceptional events would constitute a third power pole, in opposition to the poles of top-down media power and bottom-up audience power that have lain in the focus of mainstream media theories (preoccupied with more ordinary conditions of media production and usage).

There is no doubt that the classical, anthropological research of liminal media performances has got the closest, among all the branches of media research, to developing an “amodern” media theory that

leaves behind the barriers of modernist thinking. However, liminal research has a well-known limitation, namely that it was born in the broadcast media era which offered more room—in technological, cultural, and institutional terms—for exceptional, large-scale collective mobilizations to emerge. It is arguable that liminal theory can hardly deal with the fact that in today's media space, the exceptional status of events is hard to be secured. In the eventized media environment, eventlike media performances do not represent an exceptional "breach" in ordinary media reality; on the contrary, they have become the central organizing factors of this reality.

If late modern media events are episodes, and not frictions, in the ordinary machinery of media production and consumption, can they still be regarded as "third-power poles," as relatively autonomous power centers that are distinctly separated both from top-down media power and from bottom-up audience power?

SPECTACLE THEORIES

Spectacle theories, with their persuasive argument that today's abundant media events seamlessly fit into the industrial logic of spectacle making, represent the prime "modernist" challenge to liminal theory. This argument is not ungrounded. Spectacle theorists have been right to suggest that today's media events can hardly be likened to erupting volcanoes destroying a once stable landscape. Instead, they tend to solidify into static conglomerates, like the Lewinsky spectacle or the Iraq spectacle, which are endlessly replayed and commented upon, and tend to go circles rather than progressing (as liminal events should) toward an apparent conclusion that could open a new period in social life. Polarizing "spectacles" of race and social status and cultural foundations and politics are themselves long chains of eventized instances, and have not much in common with the plot structure conventionally attributed to singular "sacred" events and dramas. Instead of emblemizing a so far neglected problem and progressing toward its resolution, today's chains of events permanently recycle problems that are widely known as irresolvable, they dramatically confirm antagonisms that are commonly felt unbridgeable, they polarize social groups and maintain a state of permanent turbulence.

Spectacle theorists have persuasively argued that today's abundantly flowing media events, far from representing a "breach" in

ordinary media reality, have become the central building bricks of this reality. In this view, singular events are peak points and embodiments of an overwhelming spectacular logic that permeates the whole media system, from the machinations of propagandists (Kellner 2001) to those of self-performing spectators (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998).

In a truly modernist spirit, spectacle theorists have focused on the overall rules of media eventization rather than the ruptures that this process produces. Scholars have agreed that today's abundant media events are not interruptive, but constitutive to the spectacular machinery of media industries. They do not suspend the spectacular routine of media production—on the contrary, they are the most typical emanations of this routine, they intensify it and maximally condense it into themselves (Couldry 2003; Kellner 2003; Scannell 1995). In this view, the singular intensity of the event is secondary to the overall intensity of the spectacular logic that produces it. In this view, today's industrially amplified events, the apparent media occurrences that outrage or inspire most of us, can hardly act in the classical, neo-Durkheimian or Turnerian, sense of the word, as liminal dramas that would “stop the clocks” (Wagner-Pacifici 1986) in the community. Spectacle theories have interpreted today's eventized media system in the framework of a well-known, century-old modernist narrative about the mechanical, industrial production of culture. “What has been lost,” accordingly, “is the glory of the event, what Walter Benjamin would term its aura” (Baudrillard 1994, 21). As in many other cases, the lines of Jean Baudrillard condense in themselves the whole atmosphere of a modernist intellectual current. The popular current of spectacle theories has recycled, in a truly modernist way, Benjamin's catchy modernist adage about the extinction of aura, and asserted the downturn of media events in the age of their “mechanical reproduction.”

As explained in the appendix to this chapter (online Appendix 6), media spectacle theories have grasped their object from different perspectives. However, each understanding of media spectacle (as a heightened “torrent,” as “propaganda,” as “intensities,” or “highly productive cultural texts”) has recycled decades-old ideas about how media audiences can be connected and controlled by resonant impulses. Each approach has defined media spectacle as a heightened, intensified spiral of producing and consuming media events. The

competing theories of media spectacle differed mainly in the way they defined the “popular connections” emerging between spectacle producers and self-performing spectators.³ Mainstream accounts on media spectacle are typically modernist theories: they reiterate long-standing, established concepts about popular connection and control, they envision media spectacle as a rule-governed universe which imposes general rules of connection, and they speculate on the subordinating and empowering potentials inscribed in the rules and instances of connection. In a truly modernist spirit, dominant approaches have grasped the individual instances of “popular connection” as cases representing the overall imperatives of spectacle making. In light of spectacle theories, the question emerges: Do we need the notion of event in today’s eventized media system?

In the following, I will present two approaches suggesting that interruptive events do exist in late modern media. One approach defines interruptive events as “mundane,” the other one as “latent” phenomena. The two following approaches (the mundane event approach presented in a moment and the latent event model to be dealt with in the next section) equally suggest that even today, there exist media events which are extraordinary in the old sense of the word, namely that they indeed suspend the ordinary production of spectacle.

MUNDANE EVENTS AS CATHARTIC PERFORMANCES

Reacting to the excessive abundance of event-status instances in late modern media, scholarly representatives and heirs of liminal theory have come to the conclusion that the original conditions of liminality—events harshly and apparently distinguishing themselves from the

³ In the “torrent” model, popular resonance comes from people’s affinity with immersing into a familiar media flow that carries them safely, without demanding the least effort. In the “propaganda” model, actors of spectacle would exploit people’s affinity to arouse emotionally in reaction to moving, attractive, strong, unambiguous rhetorics. The “alienation” model of spectacle evokes the old notion of the modern individual as a rootless being who is dragged by the pleasurable, attractive, unexpected impulses of modern life. The “cultural text” model of spectacle highlights that modern men, in the intense cultural work that they invest into making sense of their complex, ambiguous lives, rely inevitably on industrially produced cultural resources.

routine and “suspending” ordinary time—are implausibly demanding and can hardly be fulfilled today. Scholars have recognized that today’s events, however intense, make part of everyday media reality; they do not “stop the clocks” in the way it has been told in the books. However, it has been suggested, the mere fact that today’s media event is mundane in the sense that it is not symbolically marked as an interruption (any more as any other event is marked as such) does not mean that it cannot become interruptive in the sense of growing into a transformative social drama.

At a conceptual level, the mundaneization of events has been reflected in shift from “liminal” rituals toward “liminoid” performances. The concept “liminoid” has been proposed by Turner himself as a means to represent smaller-scale, contingent, contested, “liminal-like moments and communitas-like sentiments that postindustrial actors experience in (ritual-like) social dramas in more individualized ways” (Alexander and Mast 2006, 11). Seen from this “liminoid” approach, in the individualized settings of late modern society it is in the rise of feelings of communality that the transformative power of mundane events manifests itself in the first place. These mediated processes of “coming together” are inevitably mundane, particularistic, and contested, however, they may overcome these barriers and universalize themselves. This needs, of course, genuine “emotional and intellectual/cognitive investment from [the part of] producers, performers *and* participating audiences” (Cottle 2006, 429; italics in the original). If this happens, mundane events become transformative dramas: instead of providing particular publics with a tribal sense of community, they interconnect secluded public “spericules” into a common public sphere in the name of universal values and interests. They become a “breach” in the everyday media machine that produces “tribal” events and divisive events instead of integrative ones.

In the liminoid approach, mundane events are social performances with high dramatic powers that urge people to collectively pursue a commonly shared, universal cause or identity. In this view, events’ symbolic energy stems from the unifying cultural discourses that they are able to mobilize—subjunctive codes of “civil society” (Alexander 2006b), shared values, popular narratives of heroism, suffering, and redemption. These tropes, if mobilized in a credible way, may counterweigh the disintegrating forces of the social controversy that inevitably

manifests itself in every event. The key point is that productive events can progress toward an (often unexpected) state of consolidation, a narrative closure that allows people to elaborate, beyond the cleavages that separate them, a sense of togetherness and common attachment to a shared political community. The key point has been formulated in many ways in the research of liminoid mundane events. Analyzing the social turmoil around the Rodney King beating, Ron Jacobs has argued that tensions have been appeased by the installation of a civil commission that both blacks and whites recognized as representing their collective interests (Jacobs 1996).⁴ Jason Mast has suggested that citizens of America reaffirmed themselves as a democratic community while debating the twists and turns of the Monica Lewinsky scandal (Mast 2006).⁵ Tamar Liebes and Zohar Kampf have found the same universal values in the new forms of communal empathy emerging right after the televised “disaster marathons” had lost their credibility in the eyes of citizens (Liebes and Kampf 2007).

In the following, I will explore the blessings and tensions of the analysis of mundane events through Jeffrey Alexander’s *The Performance of Politics* (2010), which is perhaps the most elaborated anal-

⁴ The Rodney King beating was a cathartic drama. In the course of its unfolding, as Ron Jacobs has argued, new possibilities for communal engagement emerged, allowing different interpretive communities (basically, blacks and whites) to develop at least partially overlapping narratives about the case. As Jacobs has demonstrated, the establishment of a board of civilian experts (the Christopher Commission) to examine the event and work out policy recommendations represented a “turning point for all the narrative understandings of the Rodney King crisis” (Jacobs 1996, 1260). Acting in a commonly respected way, the commission formed a bridge between both competing elite fractions and diverse racial communities. However, as Jacobs has stressed, this “reaggregation”—as Turner would call it—has been interpreted in divergent terms in press organs serving the white and the black communities. The commission reform, what predominantly white readerships have celebrated as glorious victory of America’s civic tradition, has been represented in the African-American press as a promising but uncertain alliance between blacks and whites.

⁵ In the conclusion that Jason Mast drew in his dramaturgical analysis of Monicagate, he argued that even in such a fully controversial affair, where any sign of common agreement across political publics was entirely lacking, the debating parties mobilized a “common code of civil discourse, and shared popular cultural tropes,” due to which, “America’s imagined community dramatically reaffirmed itself as real” (Mast 2006, 139).

ysis in this scholarly tradition. The key goal of the book has been to present the cultural process through which Barack Obama, this once unlikely presidential candidate, has emerged as a major force of American politics, an agent and symbol of renewal. For Alexander, Obama did more than win a presidential election in 2008: he also put an end to the decades of neoconservative domination and brought back to the scene the long-forgotten political agenda of leftist progression. This agenda, Alexander suggests, will survive Obama, since his achievement of winning the presidency as the most liberal candidate in the last half-century has been a genuinely transformative political act: “[I]t was an intervention that shifted the arc of history, and it depended on creativity, perseverance, and fortune” (Alexander 2010, 1). This transformative encounter between Obama and America, Alexander warns many times, was not determined in advance. In the case of a genuine political act such as Obama’s, Alexander cites Hannah Arendt, “something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before,” since “the new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability” (Arendt 1958, 176–78; quoted in Alexander 2010, 280–81). Beating the odds, Obama grew into a sovereign political actor and the political community of the United States rejuvenated itself. In the prologue of his book, Alexander promises to reconstruct the unfolding of this extraordinary moment in American politics.

The main question of Alexander’s book is how a heavily ritualized election campaign, this mundane event, has become a transformative moment, a breach in the political history of America. However extraordinary in their outcome, the presidential elections of 2008 was, in regard of its orchestration and genre and course, an ordinary campaign.⁶ If this mundane event could grow into an extraordinary turning

⁶ Obama’s campaign performance never suspended for a minute the spectacular circuits of mediatized politics. On the contrary, if Obama’s campaign was particular, it was due to its innovative usage of the arsenal of political spectacle. Indeed, Alexander’s book could well be read as a case study into the arms race of campaigning, into the weaponry of branding and PR. The book constantly refers to fundraising and grassroots mobilization (see ch. 3), to focus group and survey-tested political narratives, messages targeted at particular audience segments, broadcast ad campaigns disseminating the core vision of candidates, actors’ efforts to drive the news cycle, and so on.

point, this is because it allowed a social drama to unfold, at the end of which Obama could emerge as a political hero embodying the most sacred, common values of American democracy. Establishing such a symbolic authority and making himself accepted as a capable leader for such a large percentage of Republican voters as well has been a painful struggle and a huge achievement in the electoral contest.

Suggesting that 2008 became a transformative election because it was a cathartic performance, Alexander builds on the nonmodernist legacy of liminal theory. Throughout his book, he repeatedly rejects modernist narratives that would evoke general rules or determinations explaining the victory and defeat of candidates. Obama did not win, he argues, because his campaign machine was more effective—nor did people's economic worries catapult him to the presidential office—nor did the transforming demographic structure of America explain Obama's win. Alexander repeatedly rejects such mechanistic and deterministic explanations, which have flourished in media discourse, and asserted that in the given situation, Obama could not lose this election (see Alexander 2010, 163–66, 246, 280–81).⁷ As Alexander suggests, “preexisting factors do affect the outcome of a political race, but contingent performances are what determine victory and defeat” (2010, 166). Victory or defeat depend primarily on the candidates' dramatic performances that take place in the underdetermined realm of the public sphere. Election campaigns, Alexander argues, make part of this

The 2008 campaign did certainly not “stop the clocks” in the same way as most emblematic examples of broadcast media events (Watergate, the Aldo Moro kidnapping, or the Saddat visit).

⁷ In a typical quote, a *Wall Street Journal* author argued: “The economy is weak. The president is unpopular. It's a change, not a status quo, election. The surge has worked, but the war in Iraq is hardly a campaign plus. The political cycle points to a Democratic takeover. Democratic voter registration is up. Republican registration is down. Republicans trail Democrats in party identification” (quoted in Alexander 2010, 166).

In contrast to this type of argument, which assumes the political process merely mirrors back underlying structural forces, Alexander contends: “[T]he democratic struggle for power is not determined by structures. Only after its outcome is known do social scientists and pundits claim the contest was predetermined to come out in this or that way. While certainly oriented to economic situations and cultural traditions, the struggle for power is not directed by them. It is a flow, a stream of meaning making” (166).

sphere and its “civil discourse,” which enables citizens to measure political contenders to the basic moral values of the community, independently from the particularistic determinations that would push them to vote one way or another. Accordingly, the 2008 campaign allowed for political actors themselves to act as sovereign moral beings who have a relatively unconstrained space to dramatically perform their democratic virtues in front of the political community.

The key question, of course, is, where should the relative autonomy of moral judgment in late modern politics be grounded? Alexander does have an answer, but it departs from the “liminal” tradition, betrays its “amodern” potential, and leads back to the modernist discourse. As I have shown, in explaining how unconstrained spaces for moral argument can open in modern society, liminal theory has pointed to out-of-time events. Accordingly, it is events that all actors perceive as abnormal that can open an autonomous space for moral discourse that flows freely both from systemic and individual determinations. For liminal theory, the precondition of free moral discourse is that actors commonly declare a state of emergency, when all established anchors of sense making (individual and institutionalized) are suspended, people on the top and on the bottom are pushed toward questioning everything they know, and the community is relegated to its holy spirit for inspiration to find new ways.

In his analysis of the “mundane” campaign of 2008, Alexander left the liminal framework. Instead of referring to the force of emergency to make people revise their established frames, Alexander evoked people’s innate ability to act as sovereign moral beings in the ordinary context of the campaign. Alexander never sought to demonstrate the relative autonomy of the Event as an out-of-time, cathartic drama that would unfold by its inner, self-propelled logic and would force people to suspend the taken-for-granted. Instead, Alexander simply asserted the autonomy of the campaign by suggesting that politicians and voters acted as free moral beings, making free moral choices, and this is what propelled the drama. However, by evoking people’s capacity to make moral judgments, Alexander slipped back to a modernist notion of autonomy that is equated with the sovereign thought of the individual and is conceived in opposition to the force of social structures. In Alexander’s book, moral autonomy is rebinarized: it no longer grows from the “third ground” that the Event represented in liminal theory.

The *Performance of Politics* displays all the potential and shortcomings typical of the liminoid research of mundane events. The book is an important achievement because it offers a sophisticated and comfortable framework explaining how democracy can still maintain a free space for the self-government of citizens who are capable to think and act as sovereign and responsible moral beings. The *Performance of Politics* offers a solution to maintain the moral autonomy of mundane events—but it does so at the price of transferring the focus from the autonomy of events themselves (as self-propelled processes) to that of participating audiences and actors (as sovereign agents). By giving up the liminal idea of the out-of-time Event as a “third power pole” equally opposed to structure and agency, and returning to the modernist concept of human sovereignty as opposed to structural determination, Alexander’s analysis leaves behind the “collectivist” outskirts of modernism, the epistemic “limes” where liminal theory originally placed itself, and moves back toward the more central regions of the modernist discourse.

7.3. Latent Events as Experiential Enclaves

The “liminoid” approach stresses that cathartic experience may incite a collective work of moral self-purification, however, this idea in itself can hardly disprove modernist media spectacle theories. Media spectacle theories have shared a typically “neopopular” assumption that people are receptive to popular persuasion or vote of mere status interests. The liminoid counterhypothesis could hardly be adapted as genuine alternative, as it represents another neomodern, neopopular idea that people are free human agents who make sovereign moral judgments. The liminoid approach does not offer a safe exit from the modernist discourse; instead, it represents a subaltern position inside the discourse. The moral autonomy of citizens is just as “orthodox” a modernist trope as the hint that people are vulnerable to propaganda, but it is also a much less plausible one in actors’ eyes. In the collective playbook of modernist mythmaking, the trope of the sovereign citizen represents a subaltern utopia that will never be taken seriously enough by the majority of actors. On the collective neopopular battlefield, the concept of moral sovereignty offers an oppositional position that is authorized and easy

to recognize, however, does not present a real challenge to dominant approaches.

The modernist vision of citizens' moral autonomy inevitably downplays the autonomy of events themselves, the autonomy of the collective sensemaking process which has a symbolic power on its own, and it turns the event into a "third power pole" beyond the powers of structural (e.g., media and campaign) influence and people's pre-given individual preferences. If we lose sight of the autonomy of the singular event—the sovereignty of the collective forces that propel themselves farther and farther—we can hardly explain how an event is able to interrupt the overall neopopular logic of eventization, of compulsory "popular" event making. In today's event-saturated environment, the autonomy of an event is more important than its visibility and apparent intensity (which is the commonsensical starting point of all speculation on what is popular). Focus, accordingly, has to be drawn on interruptive events that exist in the form of self-propelled collective sense-making processes—as historically unique and contingent constellations emerging in the intersection of various media impulses and audience expectations—no matter how visible and intense they are.

The "mispolarization" of biopolitically interested audiences during the 2002 *polgár* performance in Hungary was such a self-propelled collective sensemaking process. Defying both key modernist models of "Who controls whom?"—the strong effects model ("structure") and the selective perception ("agency")—the dynamics of sense making propelled itself on its own trajectory and ended up in "partitioning" a secluded, enclavelike experiential space in which the "totality of the performance" (Dufrenne 1973) has been commonly reinterpreted by biopolitically oriented people located on the left pole and the right pole and the middle of the ideological spectrum.

In the following I will develop an alternative model that in my view grasps better the nature of interruptive events in the late modern, event-saturated media space. The proposed approach suggests that today, the main careers of interruptive energies are "latent events" and not the "mundane events" envisioned by the liminoid approach. My model of latent events, just like that of mundane events, draws inspiration from the world of theater in its effort to build an alternative to mainstream modernist approaches that have consistently downplayed the importance of interruptive events. However, while the "liminoid"

approach finds the analogy between mundane media events and theater in the catharsis that performances at these fields may equally trigger, my model builds on another key characteristic of theater, namely that it “partitions” the audience of its performances into secluded crowds who attend the “same” performance on different nights. The partitioning of the audience creates secluded “situations” in which the same performance affects random fractions of the mass audience in different ways. In today’s media field, I will argue, latent events may create such “situations,” delimited experiential spaces for the mass audience. This is why I call my proposed approach a “situational model of latent events.”

The proposed situational approach relies on the tradition of dramaturgical sociology, which has envisioned the theatricality of social life rather differently from the Turnerian approaches preoccupied with liminal gatherings and intense rituals or dramas. While liminal approaches have focused on apparent, intense moments when individuals get rid of their binds and “gather” to commonly rethink and reestablish their genuine collective values, dramaturgical sociology drew another picture about the theatricality of modern social life and how this theatricality produces collectively accepted representations. The question was how a group of individuals may develop a common understanding (or “frame”) about a given experiential situation that they have stepped into for a certain period. While liminal/liminoid approaches have addressed collective representations that emerge in outstanding times when people “come together,” research in dramaturgical sociology has inquired on how common understandings emerge in situations where strangers inadvertently “fall together.”

The proposed model of “latent events” draws on a key insight of Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology, namely that modern life is partitioned into secluded, self-maintaining experiential “situations.” Most of these situations of modern life—the office, the restaurant, the train, the hospital, the asylum—host random crowds of individuals whose collective presence is more a matter of coincidence than that of a self-conscious and engaged “gathering.” However, members of these relatively random gatherings interact with each other and develop shared understandings about the general rules of conduct and their own roles prescribed by the situation. These situation-bound collective representations (called “frames” by Goffman [1974]) strongly influence participants’ role performances, and through them, their personal

identities. The “situational” string of dramaturgical sociology relies on the phenomenological idea that social life requires the permanent maintenance of general perception schemes that people can commonly accept as valid definitions of social reality. The phenomenological idea is heavily present in the work of Goffman, who in his *Frame Analysis* explores the minute details of how people develop a common perception about the totality of the experienced situation.⁸

Goffman’s oeuvre is a magnificent demonstration of the simple idea that modern life experience is compartmentalized (Burns 1992, 239) into self-enclosed experiential spaces where interacting strangers commonly develop shared perception schemes that may define their personal identity and agency, often well beyond the limits of the situation. Goffman’s “situational” approach has been broadened to media by Joshua Meyrowitz who has defined media-maintained “situations” as perceptual fields, given patterns of access to social information, general patterns of experiencing social life (Meyrowitz 1990, 88). It is the temporary rise of such experiential situations that I will call a “latent event” in the following.

To understand the latency of some interruptive events in late modern media, it may be worth it to turn to theater for an analogy. The theater industry regularly produces instances that are events but that are not recognized as such and work in latency: “theater nights.” The “theater night” is a singular occasion where a rehearsed performance is enacted in front of a random crowd of individuals who assemble in the theater hall and have a particular, unique experience of the performance. In theater, it is a truism that the same play may bring catharsis on one night and boredom on another, just as a joke may incite laughter one evening and go unnoticed on another. The aesthetic power of a play depends on its proper actualization and enactment in the context of its live performance. However, spectators are not aware of the fact that the same play may foster different reactions in another crowd on another night. The spectators at a given performance “fall together” in the theater hall and form a heterogeneous crowd which, in spite of being composed of strangers, is able to collectively react to the performance

⁸ For an application of the same phenomenological idea to theater reception, see Dufrenne (1973, 58).

and to develop a common experience of the play. Spectators and actors on a given night coproduce a singular event, however, this event remains in latency for spectators who (unlike theater actors⁹) are not aware of the singularity of the given night that they have attended.¹⁰

Theater nights are latent events which are not recognized as sovereign events to be attended: what spectators, reasonably, expect to encounter in the theater is the play that they assume to be reproduced night by night, and to be universally accessible in an unchanged form for all spectators, irrespective of which night they attend.¹¹ This spectatorial expectation is not ungrounded. Indeed, it is more reasonable to say that the audience attends the rehearsed performance-commodity itself rather than one of its particular enactments at a given night. By

⁹ There is, however, a fundamental difference between the latent events of theatrical and media performance. A theater night is a “latent” event for audiences only. Theater actors know very well that every singular night is an event on its own. Actors are equally well aware of the arbitrary strings of aesthetic power that can make spectators laugh, one night, on the very same phrase or gesture that left indifferent the crowd of the night before. The same arbitrary strings, that ripple unexpected engagements in the given context of a particular event, do exist and play a similar role in the “latent events” of politics, as well. However, in the field of mediatized politics, all this takes place “behind the backs” of actors and audiences equally. In the realm of late modern mediatized performance, “latent events” just happen: crowds who attend a performance (e.g., a political program, new legislation, a scandal, and so on) may gather in separate “virtual theater halls,” but no one knows about the existence of these separate aesthetic force fields.

¹⁰ These “situational” insights may supplement previous media and cultural research, which has taught us that common representations emerge either in the banal, everyday flows of culture (e.g., TV news), or in the engaged identity work of interpretive communities (e.g., fandom) or in the mass enthusiasm of collective social dramas or media rituals (e.g., outstanding media events or scandals). TV news, fan groups, or mass media events are obvious examples symbolizing how collective representations are born and nurtured.

¹¹ Theater as an established cultural form (with its sovereign aesthetics) is essentially dependent on a certain reproducibility of its performances. Accordingly, reproduction is not a necessary devil, but also a precondition of any creative renewal of theater aesthetics. If the question, “Have you seen Peter Brook’s *Marat/Sade* with the Royal Shakespeare Company?” was only relevant with an exact reference to a given night, the figure of Brook could hardly be established as an innovator who opens up new aesthetic horizons in his productions.

a theater performance, we usually refer to a reproducible commodity, a crystallized combination of a play, a theater house or company, a director, and a cast (without this, it would be entirely impossible to establish the aesthetic canon of theater through classical plays, like “*The Ring* by Chéreau and Boulez in Bayreuth in 1976”). It is in this sense that theatergoers talk about attending a theatrical event, or ask each other whether they have seen this or that performance. However, it is no less obvious that singular theater nights are events on their own as well, in the sense that they constitute temporarily secluded experiential spaces, relatively autonomous situations in which separated audience fractions can experience the “same” performance in particular ways. Singular theater nights form secluded experiential situations which, on the one hand, allow separate crowds to attend the “same” performance, but on the other, inevitably reconfigure in contingent ways the original performance canonized by the director and the actors.

My attempt to grasp latent media events as temporary experiential situations fosters the idea that mainstream media experiences, similar to theater or to social life, as Goffman has put it, may also be “compartmentalized”: enclavelike experiential situations may emerge which (in a given period or in a given audience fraction) may substantively alter the collective perception of the “state of things.” These self-enclosed experiential spaces or “situations” may entrap large-scale mainstream crowds who develop a common frame to interpret the world. The proposed situational model suggests that common perception schemes, collective representations, may emerge suddenly, spontaneously, and temporarily (that is, in an eventlike manner), and in mass-scale audiences, without the crowds of people who are developing these representations recognizing either themselves as a collective agent or the event as an outstanding moment. Seen from the “situational” perspective, a latent event is not the enthusiastic “coming together” of a self-conscious community around a ritual or ceremonial or dramatic voice (as the “liminoid” model postulates), but the sudden and temporary “falling together” of large-scale mainstream crowds in an experiential space that rearranges people’s existing affiliations and perceptual schemes.¹²

¹² As the lines suggest, the consequences of latent events as they seem from a situational approach do not fall that far from the conventional scholarly understanding of events as temporary processes when old frames are rear-

The key point for a situational model is that the collective representations and judgments that people develop in the experiential space of a “latent event” are formed according to the event’s particular sense-making rules. It is these particular rules that make latent events interruptive. Latent events are not interruptive because they incite genuine communal feelings and enable the consumers of an individualized society to enact their better selves, to retrieve in themselves the citizen concerned with the *Res Publica*. Latent events are interruptive in the first place because they are sensemaking “enclaves”: they work by their inner logic of perception and engagement, in relative separation from the general rules of popular connection and control envisioned by the fifth estate.

A latent event, conceived of as a transient space of patterned collective sense making, may well be theorized as an autonomous “third power pole” that operates independently both from industrial strategies and from pregiven audience preferences, and suspends the systemic rules of the popular media (spectacle or market) that would integrate (as modernist observers suggest) the top-down and bottom-up determinations into a coherent and inescapable regime. Latent events interrupt these forces since they are able to modify, on their own, the meaning of the symbolic products.

Late modern media, thus, are not “spectacular” but “theatrical” in the sense that they “partition” their own experiential space and their audience in the same way as do performance industries. Popular media and mediatized politics constantly invite people to follow their

ranged and people find themselves in a new situation in which things are not the same any more. The main difference between the liminoid and the situational models lies elsewhere, namely in their judgment of what kind of instance may trigger such an interruptive moment. Liminoid theories have derived these interruptive moments from mundane events, scandals, campaigns, demonstrations, and upheavals—in a word, instances when people gather in a reaction to a moving voice that summons them to fight for removing some polluting, profane force from the body of the community. By contrast, the situational model proposes that no outstanding ritual invitation is needed for the collective sensemaking process to be set in motion. There is no need to declare an emergency for a “latent event” to take place. The interfering impulses of media and political spectacle may latently incite the temporary emergence of abnormal “experiential situations” which foster a patterned, collective sensemaking work that proceeds by its own inner dramaturgical logic and suspends the conventional patterns of meaning making.

main spectacles but inadvertently partition the mainstream audience and incite them to gather in secluded “virtual theater nights” where the “rehearsed” spectacle may ring in a distorted tone. Similarly to theater, media spectators entrapped in a virtual theater hall do not reflect on their seclusion from the general audience. They believe they are attending the same performance as everyone else, without knowing that they have access to a slightly or significantly modified version of the performance. There is, however, a key difference between media and theater, which is that actors of the latter feel directly on their skin the autonomy of each theater night (the very hardship to win the hearts of any particular crowd assembled at any particular night), in contrast to media actors, who miss any such direct feedback and who are just as ignorant as their audiences about the “partitioning” of media experience to secluded “theater nights.”

What the “situational” approach proposes to the researcher inspecting interruptive instances suspending the seemingly almighty regime of spectacular media is to look after “virtual theater nights” in the media environment, instead of overly focusing on cathartic moments. These moments are surrounded by way too much hype, blown up by fifth estate experts who draw their reputation from claiming to know the chemistry of catharsis, the alchemy of popular connection. However, under the radar of expert hype, new forms of latent events may flourish. Virtual arenas may open that temporarily mobilize commonsense making in large-scale crowds, the members of which follow their “shared dramaturgical sensibilities” (Condit 1989) and develop collective frames to make sense of the totality of the spectacular media performances they are exposed to. The collective representations established in such latent situations may bring tremendous, although unseen and unexpected, waves that may destabilize the spectacular, populist strategies of “connection making.”

As my empirically grounded arguments (Chapter 6) and theoretical considerations (Chapter 7, section 7.1) have suggested, my point is that “latent events,” these uncontrollable and unrecognized collective mobilizations, are the unintended side products of the speculative race that actors fight in order to achieve popularity through intense and exceptional event-performances that can easily undermine themselves and collapse under their own weight. Latent events are one of the reasons why neopopular strategies are “counterperformative.”

Latent events, indeed, defy the commonly envisioned neopopular rules of connection making. These events suspend those very rules of popular connection in the name of which they have been created. It seems that, paradoxically enough, the populist strategies that public actors have used in order to handle the uncertainties of popular media have produced a truly chaotic environment that contains many situations where the populist strategies themselves are inefficient. (The self-destabilizing dynamics of mediatized, populist politics evokes the self-destructive trajectory of market actors' herd behavior in times of market bubbles.) Public actors, being enmeshed in their race for "connecting" people at any price, have overlooked the risk that their excessive strive to exploit the supposed "rules of popular connection" can easily end up in a permanent rewriting of these rules and create an overall state of rulelessness. This rulelessness does not mean that the basic rules of popular media that experts have envisioned are not valid at all. The very problem is that it is hard to specify when exactly they are and when they are not valid, due to the fact that it has become impossible to recognize, on the fly, the latent events which, regularly but without being noticed, suspend the established rules of popular connection making and control. The fields of popular media and politics today, thus, form a "postnormal" environment in which rule-governed "normality" and rule-suspending "abnormality" mix and mingle.

The "postnormal," "event-driven" media environment has emerged due to public actors who have followed "modernist" strategies to exploit the alleged "new rules" of the popular media system, and who have done this with such an aggressive pace that it has gradually undermined these rules themselves and dissolved the contours of the rule-governed, "normal" media realm in which the same rules could potentially apply.

7.4. The Postnormal Space of Late Modern Media

In the last decades, the space of popular media has been saturated with eventized "connecting attempts" so radically and overwhelmingly that the very identity of both media and events has been redefined throughout this transformation. The aggressive eventization of media and politics has obscured the contours of exceptional events and created an all-encompassing "grey zone" in which the ordinary media

flow permanently fuses with the events that claim to interrupt it. In a media environment where intense and interruptive event-claims have become routine carriers of public actors' "connecting" efforts, it is impossible to use any apparent measure to tell when a truly interruptive media event takes place. This has arguably led to the collapse of what Victor Turner has called the "dialectic" of structure and antistructure, of long periods of normality and short moments of upheaval. In the following, I will argue that the "normal" and the "abnormal" sides of media have collapsed into a state that might be called "postnormality." Media and politics today are in a postnormal state in the sense that their actors and observers are not able to set the limits between their normal and their exceptional modes of operation.

The dominant, modernist discourse of media interpretation has been ill-equipped to grasp the postnormality of late modern media. This is due to the fact that modernist theories—should they conceive of media either as market, or popular culture, or spectacle—have commonly downplayed the interruptive potential of the event, claiming that individual events do not suspend the general industrialized logic of event making/popular connection, but embody it. Modernist approaches have tried to unravel the universal rules of popular connection and control, and focused on high-profile events, highly visible instances that would embody these rules. This preoccupation has made modernist approaches blind to the latently operating interruptive forces encoded into event making and popular connection.

Challenging modernist approaches, I propose that the excessive eventization of media has bought less the "death of the interruptive event" than its metamorphosis. As I have suggested, today's politics and media are shaken by mass-scale collective engagements that our conventional conceptual radar would not detect as events—in spite of the fact that they interrupt the general logic of popular media and audience and proceed by their own sensemaking logic. These "latent events" possibly signal the emergence of a new, late modern "*événementnalité*": a new, unstable mode of existence for exceptional, powerful, self-propelled, "autonomous" events.¹³ It is this transformed interrup-

¹³ The concept of high modern *événementnalité* was developed by Pierre Nora (1974).

tivity that I have tried to grasp with my situational model, which in my view offers the best perspective to the emerging “*événementalité*” of the late modern media era. With its prime focus being laid on latently emerging situations of collective sense making, the proposed “situational” model can unravel how interruptive events work in an eventized media environment and explain why they work latently, their interruptive force being systematically unrecognized.

The situational model of latent events, and the corresponding vision of a “postnormal” media space, challenges the dominant modernist theories suggesting that late modern popular media are governed by the rules of popularity which would uninterruptably impose themselves on media and politics. A “situational” perspective challenges each mythical trope of the modernist discourse. If latent events do exist, their existence demonstrates not only the instability of the media field but also the half-sidedness of the modernist preoccupation with highly visible, “irresistible” instances in which the systemic “logic” of popular media would manifest itself. If latent events do really form enclaves with their own inner sensemaking mechanisms, this brings into question the alleged universality of the systemic rules of “connection making” that modernist theories of popular media have been concerned with. If latent events take place “behind the backs” of actors and observers and are thus hard to recognize on the fly, they have to be reconstructed retrospectively, independently of the fifth estate’s ongoing, instant interpretations—which, then, may well be suspected to miss the processes of latent event formation.

The interruptive force of popular connection strategies and the resulting possibility that they may trigger interruptive events has been systematically rendered invisible by the modernist discourse of the fifth estate. The “uneventful” understanding of popular media has made the modernist “neopopular” discourse blind not only to destabilizing events, but also to how they arise as the unintended side effects of populist connection making.

In late modernity, an uneventful interpretive discourse dominates actors’ and observers’ reflections on a heavily eventized media environment. The incongruence between media reality and media interpretation has led to an excessive and blind production of eventized “connecting” attempts, which have saturated the media field with potentially interruptive impulses that have triggered the rise of latent

mobilizations and a subsequent sense of chaos and loss of control among both actors and observers. In the end, an opaque and menacing media landscape has emerged, filled with highly visible events with a questionable interruptive potential on the one hand, and latent events with a truly interruptive force but no visibility, on the other. In the opaque and ambiguous realm of late modern media, rule-governed “normality” and rule-breaking “abnormality” mix and mingle. The collapse of rule-governed media “normality” and rule-breaking, interruptive “abnormality” into an uncertain state of “postnormality” has been a key structural consequence of the populist race for “connection” in the realms of media and politics.

In the last decades, the neopopular discourse of the fifth estate has driven public actors into excessive strategies of “connection” and “eventization” which have gradually dissolved the transparent, rule-governed realm of “normal” media operation that the same interpretive discourse has tried to reflexively appropriate. The collapse of media “normality,” ironically, has been fostered by fifth estate professionals who have gained their symbolic authority by successfully maintaining the myth of a “normal” media environment. The fifth estate, it seems, has grown influential enough to devour its own foundations. It has so aggressively pushed actors to adapt themselves to systemic media rules that the excessive momentum of this common adaptation has undermined the very same rules to which actors have tried to adapt themselves. In the name of understanding and exploiting a newly emerging “normality” (that is, the rule-governed system of late modern popular media), fifth-estate media interpreters have triggered the rise of a “postnormal” environment in which the boundaries between rule and exception disappear.

Due to the influence of the fifth estate, popular media have transformed into a “postnormal” landscape, the actors of which lack the ability to properly set the confines between the “normal” and the “abnormal,” the realms where the general rules and systemic pressures of media culture/market/spectacle are and are not valid. A new awareness of this “postnormal” condition would require us to fully reflect on the very impossibility of separating rule-governed ordinary time from ruleless exceptional time and of distinguishing “real” pressures from “mythical” pressures when it comes to judge whether and how much actors in a certain context need to “adapt themselves” to the constraints of popular media and popular audiences.

Conclusion

The Dialectic of Liquid Modernity and the Crisis of Democracy

My book has aimed to show that the late modern “liquidization” of political control has less opened a genuinely “liquid” new age than triggered the “solidification of old metaphors” into new “truths” (to use a Nietzschean adage [Barthes 1975, 43]), which truths have ossified into bars and fences around actors, speculative “iron cages” in a late modern world. This dialectic has driven the “liquidization” or “postbureaucratic rationalization” of democratic politics in the last few decades. After the weakening of bureaucratic mass parties and other representative organizations, actors and experts collectively engaged in deciphering the universal “new rules” of a new mediatized age in politics, but ended up in an imitative process of collective speculation in which most attempts to connect and control the people are orchestrated as the repetition of past instances of successful “connection” that allegedly embody the eternal laws of popularity. It is all as if actors followed the dialectical script drafted by Adorno and Horkheimer: “under the leveling rule of abstraction, which makes everything in nature repeatable, . . . the liberated finally themselves become the “herd” (*Trupp*), which Hegel identified as the outcome of enlightenment” (2002, 9). My aim in this conclusion will be threefold: to theorize the dialectic of liquid modernity, to recap the evidence presented so far in support of the main thesis, and to connect this argument to contemporary debates about democracy.

Most of today’s debates on democracy gravitate around the structural problem of elitism, the opening of a hardly bridgeable gap

between the controlling elites and the controlled society. Many critics fear with good reason today's crisis may be the final one (Runciman 2013): the oligarchization and hollowing of our political systems may well mark their "transformation from egalitarian mass democracy to facade democracy" (Habermas 2015). This line of political critique closely relates to the growing resentment against global superelites accumulating their wealth and power undisturbed by democratic controls and an ethics of sharing. The democratic system, as many have argued, has lost its force to moderate the excesses of capital accumulation and the striving of the "power elite" (the rule of which, in the historic moment when C. Wright Mills originally unraveled it, could well be considered as a "shining example of liberal pluralism" compared to what happens today, Wolfgang Streeck argues [2011, 29]). It is hard to assess the chances of democracy's immunizing force being restored today, against the will of elites who (aim to) profit from its very absence. Still, if we want to use this (however tiny) chance, what we need to assess above all are the multiple roots of the unprecedented concentration of elite power: the fact that it has arisen from the complex interplay of relatively autonomous processes. Elitism is certainly a symptom of today's capitalist hypertrophy and democratic paralysis; however, these ills could hardly be considered simply as each others' pendants in a coherent "post-democratic" political régime of a "market and corporation-led society" (Crouch 2011, 144) (this formula of Colin Crouch represents well the string of critique of which Streeck and Habermas are also leading figures, see also Dinan and Miller 2007). My aim is by no means to refute the assumed interconnections of current democratic and capitalist deformities, but to show that these two ills are interconnected because they both respond to the same structural crisis, and not because they represent ideologically equivalent responses. The two deformities have developed in a relative autonomy from each other, and it is vital to understand this autonomy.

This idea of "relative autonomy" has informed my initial distinction between marketization and mediatization as two transformative processes which, on the one hand, bear key structural resemblances and, on the other hand, are driven by different sets of concepts and models, different experts and actors, different institutions—and also play out with different forces on different terrains. In the political system, the prime transformative force in the last decades has been mediatization. Demo-

cratic politics has been altered from a mass party-based system of class representation to a popular media-based system of governance in the name of “the people.” In late modern democracy, popular media have been thought to dethrone the emptying infrastructures of mass parties and grow to the prime intermediating channel connecting the state and the political elite with the citizen. Of course, in the emerging system of popular media-based political control, many techniques of market research and promotional communication have been applied. However, these “marketization” techniques have themselves been transformed into applied media management (as marketing and PR have converged in the digital age [p. 238], and consumer preferences become increasingly assessable through media usage more than anything else [see chapter 5.1]). Even more importantly, marketing and polling techniques have mostly been put into the service of a collective sense-making process harboring a closed set of collective representations about “the popular” and the media-immersed “people.” This collective sense-making process, which I have called the “neopopular” discourse, has fundamentally driven the process of mediatization. With the “neo” tag I have referred to the fact that this discourse has reconfigured old nineteenth-century modernist binary tropes about the “popular” realm and its nonpopular counterparts (citizenry, high culture, rationality, elite, etc.). The key argument of my book has been that neopopular models and accounts have been more faithful to this modernist inheritance than to the transforming realities of media and politics. The mediatization of democracy has ultimately been driven by the neopopular discourse that has misunderstood and seceded from the—chaotic and dysfunctional—mediatized political world it has created.

My claim that the process of mediatization has been shaped by a “neopopular” discourse has intentionally referred to the “neoliberal,” “neoclassical” discourses that have driven the marketization of economy. Importantly, this reference has been aimed to stress these discourses’ structurally similar trajectories (neo-orthodoxy, elitism, collective speculation)—rather than a firm ideological correspondence. In ideological terms, the neopopular and neoliberal/neoclassical discourses are often disharmonic, most apparently in their understanding of the social actor. The neoliberal/neoclassical discourse envisions rational economic actors, driven by self-interest, motivated to effectively seek after and actively process market information. By contrast, the “neo-

popular” discourse harbors an infinite variety of accounts on popular media audiences, which have been portrayed both as rational and irrational, educable and nomadic, tribal beings and experimenting individuals, evasive and open to persuasion—mostly, as I have shown in detail, a combination of these opposites. Given these differences, and many others addressed so far and below, I have renounced the ideology-critical path of grasping the discourses of marketization and mediatization as mutually harmonizing ideologies of a new coherent political economic régime where capitalist hypertrophy and democratic paralysis mutually correspond. Instead, I have proposed to grasp the marketization of economy and the mediatization of politics as relatively autonomous processes which, however, bear the same structural traits of the inner dialectical tensions of the late modern social order.

The proposed critique of the dialectic of liquidization addresses the structural transition from a high modern order of bureaucratic control to a late modern régime of postbureaucratic (“liquid”) control. This approach rethinks the Weberian–Frankfurtian critique of rationalization in today’s postbureaucratic context. The dialectical critique established by Frankfurt School theorists has addressed the bureaucratic rationalization process that marks the unfolding of modernity. The most important tenet of their Weber-inspired critique of rationalization has been that modernization reverts to the decline of modern individuality and to a mass conformism with totalistic mythical beliefs supported by bureaucratic systems. Arguably, the above critique of a self-defeating modernity that reverts to myth has not lost its relevance in today’s late modern, individualized societies. Modern civilization, although its bureaucratic phase may have passed its zenith, has not got rid of its self-totalizing temptations. Today’s “liquid” modern civilization incites processes of “postbureaucratic rationalization” that result in erecting self-totalizing mythical “iron cages”—which, this time, have a speculative and not a bureaucratic character.

I have theorized the inner tensions of postbureaucratic rationalization with the help of Zygmunt Bauman’s work which, being indebted to the Frankfurt critique of modern civilization, has seemed to me the most sensitive framework to criticize the corrosive dialectic of late, in his terms, “liquid” modernity. “The specific inflection of Bauman’s critique of modernity is as a critique of order” (Beilharz 2000, 170), Peter Beilharz has noted with good reason. The inclination to establish pre-

dictable order and control, for Bauman, is the prime defining feature of (high and late or post-) modern civilization:

From its inception, modernity was known in one form only: that of “managerial” modernity, an order-designing and order-administering modernity. . . . [T]he preoccupation with order, or with an orderly, manageable society, is a common denominator of other modern undertakings: industrialism, capitalism, democracy. Through somewhat different means the same ends have been pursued. The longing for human-made order lubricated the wheels of the three “society-targeted” modern pursuits. . . . [T]he three roads converged on a regular, predictable and controllable human habitat as its imagined/desired destination. (Bauman-Tester 2001, 74, 78)

Following Bauman’s argument, my starting point is that the recent transition from a solid (bureaucratic) to a liquid (postbureaucratic) model of social ordering represents a core civilizational switch in modernity that has led to the rise of new, marketized, and mediatized systems of control in the fields of industrial production (post-Fordism), economy (deregulation, financialization), and politics (“mediatized populist democracy”). I have critically addressed the civilizational switch through the key idea of “liquid control,” the main ordering principle of the emerging age. My aim has been to show that the crisis of democracy today stems from the fact that the newly emerging procedures of “liquid control” are self-destructive. In politics, like in finance, they produce chaotic results instead of the order they envision; they revert to mythical belief instead of the precise understanding and coordination they hope to achieve. My critique of the dialectic of liquid modernity consists in the following points.

(1) Elite Strive for the Unmediated Control over the Fragmented Whole

Neopopular and neoliberal/neoclassical discourses have revolved around the foundational idea of liquid control, expressing a commonly shared suspicion that postindustrial society cannot be managed by the

“big institutions” of bureaucratic high modernity. Neopopular and neoliberal/neoclassical discourses have both been fed (which does not mean invented or imposed) by powerful elite groups who questioned the intelligence of bureaucratic organizations to connect and control socioeconomic actors. They have believed that the fragmented and individualized settings of society and economy require more effective organizing mechanisms that give more space to actors’ divergent aspirations and more control to the elite operators of these mechanisms (chapter 1.1., 1.5.). Elite proponents of “liquid control” have hoped to break free from the inferences of rigid, nonintelligent bureaucratic intermediaries and get to a direct understanding and control of the fragmented totality of late modern society.

There is, then, a fundamental totalizing strive that marks the “liquid” turn in late modernity. This is not self-evident, as the blame for totalizing control has usually fallen on the bureaucratic order of high modernity, the predecessor of today’s “liquid” civilization. It is bureaucratic order, and not “liquid” order, that critics from Weber and Adorno to Bauman and other theorists of “second modernity” have grasped as a (possibly) “total” administration. However, there are good reasons to argue that the seemingly more sensitive and flexible instruments of “liquid control” that elites have relied on in the hope of reaching out to the fragmented whole are just as self-totalizing as the worst face of their bureaucratic predecessors.

(2) “Neo-Orthodox” Return to the Binary Tropes of Prebureaucratic Modernity for Understanding the Fragmented Whole of Postbureaucratic Society

As the bureaucratic integration of society—the welfare state model of state-led planning (Harvey 2005), the Fordist company, the mass party, mass media—has been discredited, elite actors and experts have turned back to the tropes of prebureaucratic (pre-Fordist, prewelfare state, premass democracy, prebroadcasting) modernity for inspiration in a postbureaucratic world. Instead of truly facing the menacing complexity of their liquid world, they have looked for familiar and consoling “anchors” in the commonly shared intellectual tradition of

modernist social analysis. As this rich heritage was born in the nineteenth century when the elites and the social whole were not interconnected by mass-scale bureaucratic intermediaries, it has offered a panoply of sensemaking tools that enabled the elite observer to directly make sense of the operation of the society as a whole. Prebureaucratic modernist thought, thus, has inspired a very boom of neo-orthodox theories about a postbureaucratic world, which, of course, have not simply borrowed from their original sources but also refined and rethought them.

Neoliberal/neoclassical theories have retailed the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figure of the self-interested rational actor and the idea of the market economy being a distinct sphere from politics and the state. Neopopular theories, by contrast, have drawn back to the nineteenth-century understanding of the uncivilized “popular classes” denied democratic citizenship—the negative mirror image of the civilized citizen of the liberal bourgeoisie (chapter 1.2. – see Tulloch 2000; Murdoch 1993; Hallin 1992; Gans 1975). This binarizing, modernist discursive code, which has distinguished a “popular” ground sphere from a “nonpopular” elite sphere, was born in the prebureaucratic modern era when the upper sphere of government and the ground sphere of “the masses” were not interconnected by large representative intermediary institutions like mass parties (or Fordist companies, or mass political press). The discursive tropes of prebureaucratic modernity have shaped the self-understanding of today’s mediatized democracy, after the vanishing of the bureaucratic system of “party-based representative democracy” and its large, pyramidal intermediating institutions.¹

¹ As I have shown, the neopopular discourse has maintained three basic tropes: the first has lied in pointing at apparently popular instances and distinguishing them from their non-popular counterparts. The second trope has been to explore the rules of popularity that would drive the popular power of the above instances. The third trope, that I have called liquid binarizing, has been the practice of harmonizing the popular-nonpopular binary (or one of its synonyms, eg. populist-nonpopulist, etc.) with modernist normative binaries (eg. suppression vs. emancipation) and the existing complexity and ambiguity of social reality, at the very same time.

(3) Two “Liquid” Models of Ordering the Fragmented Whole: The Market and the Heroic Elite Team

On the grounds of the “neo-orthodox” images of the social/economic actor (profit-maximizing individual versus a “people” unmanageable in the established frames of “high” society), two different objections against bureaucracy have emerged, and two alternative proposals have been made. Neoliberal/neoclassical approaches, postulating rational market actors, have rejected the alleged claim of bureaucratic state institutions to “know better” what is good for individual actors than the actors themselves. Neoliberal/neoclassical doctrines have been marked by a basic suspicion against any planning agency that would have a prior authority to define what actors want and need. By contrast, the neopopular critique of bureaucratic control has not rejected the prior authority of planning centers at all. It rejected the bureaucratic infrastructures and sought more efficient intermediaries to articulate the needs and wants of the people. In the neopopular vision, nonbureaucratic, creative elite hubs should have priority in assessing, forming, expressing, and articulating the wants and needs of the popular realm.

These objections have fed two different visions of liquid “ordering.” The neoliberal/neoclassical vision praised the market freed from bureaucratic interferences as the optimal ordering mechanism, due to its ability to aggregate the dispersed preferences and information that exist “out there” and not reveal themselves for any centrally placed planning center. Accordingly, the price mechanism of the market would be the only nonbureaucratic instrument that is able to aggregate dispersed information and preferences into a valid universal judgment of the needs and wants of the fragmented whole. No such impersonal, quasi-natural ordering mechanism exists in the much more chaotic neopopular universe. What stands at the center of this world is not the “invisible hand” but the heroic, creative elite team that can detect better than anyone else what the people, the true “popular” audience, want and need (my examples were the Kennedy team winning the nomination “from the outside”, against the Democratic Party establishment, the brand-making decision center of the post-Fordist company, the creative team in the complex production culture of con-

temporary television, the PR teams who control the news cycle against the journalists as these latter's autonomy corrodes [chapter 2.2.]).

Along these lines, the alleged needs and wants of the fragmented whole have been impersonated by two totalizing figures, "the market(s)" and "the people." These figures have promised that the fragmented whole can be made intelligible for the elite professionals of "the market" and of "the people." These elite professionals would float "above" the whole as the Spirit would hover over the waters. In neo-liberal/neoclassical imagery, the most respected elite professionals have been the guardians of the unfettered market. As Wolfgang Streeck put it, "in the liberal utopia of standard economic theory, . . . economics as 'scientific knowledge' teaches citizens and politicians that true justice is market justice" (Streeck 2014, 44). This justice cannot be possessed by any particular market actor, only the guardian institutions whose prime duty is to guarantee that market justice unravels itself through the equilibrium price. The market price aggregates all the dispersed information and represents a higher intelligence than any single market actor. No single actor should be able to estimate the real market value of an entity more precisely than the collective judgment which expresses itself in the market price. This basic neoliberal insight is represented in the financial market adage that "no one can beat the market."

By contrast, in the neopopular discourse, the heroic elite team is able to beat other actors in pleasing the "people." The justice of the media-using "people"—and the laws of mediatized society—have been thought to reveal themselves in the palpable popular success of the heroic elite team. In the neopopular discourse, it is the loud popular success of an outstanding actor (p. 198–201), and not the impersonal equilibrium price as in neoclassical/neoliberal discourses, that bears in itself the collective judgement of the fragmented totality of social actors.

In the two "neo-orthodox" images of liquid control, the elite guardians of the free market and the heroic creative elite team, have been established as the key guarantors of a more genuine and effective, postbureaucratic integration of the fragmented compounds of late modern markets and "people." Both images stem from the revival of the idealized distinctions that "prebureaucratic" nineteenth-century modernity had established between capitalist market economy and the government/state on the one hand, and the "popular" realm and liberal-bourgeois citizenry on the other.

(4) Infrastructures of “Liquid Control” Feed the Schism of Collective Speculation from the “Ground”

Neo-orthodox discourses of liquid control, as I have argued, have constructed elite positions from which to understand and manage the “free market” and “media-using people,” that is, the “fragmented whole” of postindustrial society and economy. This elitist management of the (allegedly) postbureaucratic world, however, has reproduced a fundamental schism typical of prebureaucratic modern settings where the realm of elites and that of socioeconomic actors were not bridged by large bureaucratic institutions like the welfare state or the mass party or the Fordist company. As the bureaucratic institutions have emptied, so too have the key intermediaries of the bureaucratic world disappeared. (In the high modern era these intermediaries maintained stable connections between the elite realm and the ground. They included the regulated commercial bank and investment bank in the sphere of finance, the mid-range party official or “local boss” in politics, the engineers and the sales force of the Fordist company, the news journalist in mass media, the anchorperson and the producer in American network television [chapter 2.1.].) These intermediaries, in the high modern era, had substantial powers to negotiate and intervene in central decisions, given their irreplaceable knowledge about the “ground.” As bureaucratic intermediaries have weakened, the new, postbureaucratic elites have been left without negotiating partners—which means they have been left alone with their preestablished theories and techniques by which they hoped to grasp the fragmented landscape in its totality.

As elites questioned the ability of bureaucratic intermediaries to connect them with the fragmented whole of the media-using people, they got to similar conclusions as actors of marketized finance: that “fundamental” reality (of markets, of the people) is too messy to be directly knowable for the individual observer and has to be approached through its representations mirrored in the collective intelligence of a myriad of other actors (p. 71–4, 147–9). Thus, the elite proponents of liquid control have enclosed themselves in speculative bubbles where popular media realities could only be assessed through collectively shared myths. These mythical sensemaking tools of postbureaucratic elites have not been innocent: they have built on and revitalized rigid,

stereotyped, prebureaucratic discourses on “the popular”, which have greatly shaped the newly implemented techniques of postbureaucratic “popular control”.

The seeds of the schism between the “new age” of popular media and its mythical understanding have been planted from the beginnings. Given these hardly evitable, structural imbalances of institutional change (p. 77, 81), I have followed and developed further Nick Couldry’s (2000) fascinating recognition, that popular media power—and mediatized power in general—can hardly be understood without assessing first the power of collective popular myths about popular media.

(5) Speculative Bubbles: Self-Expansive Collective Traps

The alienation of popular media reality and its mythical understanding is, importantly, a broader, collective phenomenon that concerns not only the dominant ideological beliefs but also their established critiques, which are codependent with the dominant views they criticize. As I have argued, to understand the destabilizing force of the mythical stereotypes that misrepresent our “free market age” and “popular media age,” it is not enough to ask what their key ideologists think. More important is to ask how today’s “marketized” and “mediatized” social life can be conceived of at all in the discursive space shaped by prearranged orthodox oppositions. This raises discomfiting questions regarding the outer limits of the “neoliberal/neoclassical” and the “neopopular” discourse, as neither of them can be simply equated with their “dominant” ideological strings. Instead, they should be regarded as collective mythmaking universes that are held together by the mutual pull of dominant and critical alternatives gravitating around each other. Such an approach is perfectly legitimate, as I have proved, in the case of the neopopular discourse, and important research exists that theorizes market-related economic discourses in a similar way, as the “co-opetition” of “complicit antagonists.”²

² See chapter 3.1., where I present how Orléan (2014) and MacKenzie (2011) have shown why financial market actors tend toward avoiding genuine diversity and deferring to collective conventions; in the same pages I also refer to Bryan et al. (2012), who have applied this argument to the collective failure

Today's binding discourses about free markets and popular media are more than "simply" dominant ideologies or faulty paradigms: they are mythical systems that drag sensemaking actors into a web of preestablished orthodox positions and antagonisms. The rise of such collective mythmaking systems has found its reflection in the everyday talk about speculative "bubbles." This bubble intuition refers to the risk of actors commonly falling hostage to collective social traps: binding discourses which offer sets of thinkable alternatives that are too narrow since they interweave most positions that can possibly be taken. In this book I have argued that discourses around free markets and popular media form such bubbles: binding systems of precoded orthodox antagonisms in which thinkable positions are determined in advance and any position gains its prime justification from making part of the web of plausible and complicit alternatives rather than its fit with reality (p. 172–9). The bubble approach applies well to various galaxies of the neoclassical/neoliberal universe: as we have seen, the same processes of collective mythmaking can be revealed in relation to financial markets, academic economics, or neoliberal ideology. These subfields are different in many respect, but they are substantively similar in the fact that their actors tend to occupy preestablished—orthodox or neo-orthodox—positions and their controversy is driven by the self-propelled antagonism of these alternatives. In a similar vein, the neopopular debates about the media-using "people" have been framed along the orthodox antagonism of cultural populism/popular culture and their negation (the same clash in other formulations: "cultural democrats" vs. "cultural elitists"; "critical traditionalists" vs. "popular culturalists"; "critical modernist" vs. "critical postmodernist" perspectives; "simplistic" vs. "deliberative" approaches; "critics" vs. "defenders" of popular media; "utopian critique" vs. "populist enthusiasm"; "media-optimism" vs. "media-pessimism" [see chapter 4.1.]). The neopopular discourse has operated key distinctions opposing the elite and the people, the citizen with the mass, quality press with cheap press, high culture with low culture, reason with emotion, indoctrination with emancipation; in a word, the noble qualities of enlightenment with the profane qualities

of academic economics, and I present how Mirowski (2013a) has grasped the neoliberal discourse not as an ideology but a Russian doll-like thought collective that expands even upon the Occupy movement.

of the popular. Of course, the normative loading of poles has been, as I have shown in detail (chapter 4.1., 4.3.), flexibly interchangeable.

The case of the neopopular discourse makes it clear that the self-propelled logic of collective speculation urges rivaling accounts to relentlessly universalize themselves—this being their only defense from the attacks of their “complicit antagonists,” with whom they are too closely positioned to be safe from their potentially fatal attacks (p. 219–20). In the neopopular discourse, as I have argued (chapter 4.3.), to build up any new position or new concept has necessarily meant to transform some well-established and safe orthodoxy into an even more sophisticated and more complex neo-orthodoxy. This self-propelled dynamic toward integrating the totality discourages thinking outside the box since it maintains the false illusion that the royal way toward innovatively renewing established positions lies in making them ever more sophisticated and ever more comprehensive. Thus, the accounts made inside the “bubble” appear to be extremely complex, capable of integrating all information about the “fragmented whole.” I have presented in detail how “neopopular” thinkers have maintained the illusion of “integrating the fragmented whole” into universal models—with the help of their “weightless hybrid” concepts, “schizophrenic narratives,” and “sponge theories” (p. 209, 214, 216)—to allow the preestablished, stereotypical tropes of “the popular” to flourish undisturbed. In the industrial wings of the neopopular discourse, expertly narratives have offered a frictionless interweaving of an (alleged) respect for complexity and the people’s sovereignty with the old dogmas of control and persuasion (as I have shown in relation with consumer behavior analysis [chapter 5.1.], political PR [chapter 5.2.], political marketing [chapter 5.3.], commercial marketing [online Appendix 4], and event making [online Appendix 4]). With this universal appeal, even the most dominant, industrial wings of the neopopular discourse have been able to radiate in parallel a comforting sense of efficient control, a utopian sense of “popular” emancipation, and an earthly sense of pragmatic realism.

Reconciling the orthodox, dogmatic beliefs about efficient control and genuine emancipation, and reconciling both of these beliefs with an awareness of complexity, neopopular collective myths have expanded themselves on all possible terrains as the new universal models defining the new rules of mediatized late modern society.

(6) Counterperformative Speculation Maintains a “Postnormal” World

The self-propelled oversophistication of speculative models and theories—both neoliberal/neoclassical and neopopular—has led to the fatal consequence that their proponents have lost their capacity to specify the limits of their validity, to recognize those contexts when they are invalid. Speculative accounts on the “free market” and on the media using “people” have been complexified to a level of unfalsifiable, mythical world explanations.

Speculative models have been blind not only to their outer limits but also their unintended consequences—to the fact that the gap between outer reality and speculative representation has widened so much that actors, by collectively following the speculative “new rules” of behavior, have created new realities betraying these rules. These severe dysfunctions have led to a state where the speculative “ordering” (the “liquid” control) of “the market” or “the people” becomes not only counterproductive but, even the more, “counterperformative.” This means not only that collective speculation is fallacious, but also and primarily that it makes “self-negating prophecies” which actively create a world that systematically defies the rules that speculators envision and follow.

My key point here is that the self-totalizing dynamics of collective speculation makes actors blind to the frontier between the realm of normality where the envisioned “liquid” rules are valid and the realm of abnormality where the same rules collide due to the excesses of actors’ collective speculation. Speculating actors are often blind to those moments when events cross the line between normality and abnormality. This blindness is not unknown to analysts of free market economies. The notion of “counterperformativity” itself has been introduced in reference to the blindness of derivative market actors who unreflexively applied their established economic models on unprecedentedly and unintelligibly complex instruments (MacKenzie 2006). The same blindness has been reflected in George Soros’s concept of the “radical fallibility” of market actors who would follow their models even in extreme, abnormal, “far-from-equilibrium” situations, their models suggesting to them such situations do not even exist (Soros

2009). It is arguably due to the structural blindness that even the 2008 financial crash could not be established as a self-evident proof that the line between normal and abnormal had been crossed. The collapse did not bring a new beginning and a common catharsis. Instead, what 2008 seems to have triggered is a “bubble neurosis,” a chronic irritation and fear that bubbles grow constantly so that we cannot know whether we are just blowing a new one. Nowhere does the blurring of the line between normal and abnormal manifest itself more clearly than in the fact that even 2008 could not bring a cathartic recognition of a “fundamental” market reality in the name of which the fallacious world of finance could be repaired or brought back to “normal.”

I have unraveled a similar process of counterperformative speculation in the sphere of mediatized politics: the rise of rule-defying situations, “latent events,” where the commonly envisioned new rules of popularity are invalid. I have explored a “latent event” in Hungarian politics, in which the impulses of the governing party’s harsh neopopular campaign have triggered three different polarizations in three secluded parts of the audience. Two of these polarizations happened along the lines expected from the neopopular viewpoint, but the third polarization process was very different and counterproductive for the governing party, but it remained totally unrecognized (chapter 6.4.). Most importantly, this chaotic condition was commonly produced by the parties in government who tried to launch an irresistible neopopular campaign and the parties in opposition who silently assisted it, as they also shared the belief that “neopopular” campaigns are irresistible and it is better to evade than to oppose them.

In 2002, the two political camps not only shared the same stereotypes, not only acted as each others’ “complicit antagonists,” but also proved equally unable to learn from the government’s electoral defeat. First, the New Right’s 2002 campaign has been preserved in collective memory as a stunning example of effective popular mobilization and mediatized political identity building. Second, actors have concluded that if even such a powerful popular campaign could fall, the only explanation is that it has been beaten by an even more prodigious and irresistible neopopular strategy. Thus, collective speculation has almost automatically established the ultimate argument that the winning card was played out by the Socialists who, in the last weeks of the campaign, promised huge and immediate welfare transfers to the people. The

canonized memory of collective neopopular speculation has been fully unaware of the fact demonstrated in this book that the New Right government had lost its cause in the middle period of the campaign, well before the Socialists made their final, desperate promises. Speculating actors and observers wanted to see the 2002 campaign as a populist race to the bottom, and they found the clues to justify their stereotyped presumptions. By far the most important thing that actors should have learned from 2002 is that the government's "celebratory" performance collapsed under its own weight—but this possibility has not even been raised in the universe of speculation.

The 2002 campaign in Hungary is an apparent case of how neopopular speculators may collectively contribute to the rise of latent events and ignore the waves such events cause. Neopopular speculation triggers unexpected and chaotic waves of public opinion formation which remain in latency, under the radar. This chaotic condition has been theorized in this book as "postnormality," referring to the impossibility of separating the ordinary times of rule-governed normality from the extraordinary situations when rules collide. In Hungary in 2002, neopopular rules were both valid and invalid, in the secluded experiential situations of the three audience fractions (or "crowds," to evoke the theatrical metaphor I have used). In the "postnormal" condition of today's media and politics, it is impossible to tell "on the fly" whether actors find themselves in a normal time, when the neopopular rules of "liquid" connection and control apply, or in an exceptional time, when the same neopopular rules are self-defeating and dangerous to follow.

(7) Secondary Spheres of Collective Speculation: The Intermediating Infrastructures of a "Liquid" Civilization

I have started my concluding argument by evoking the striving of post-bureaucratic elites for the "unmediated control of the fragmented whole." I have also shown why this has been an illusion. No power center can work without solid intermediating infrastructures: as bureaucratic intermediaries have been dismantled, new speculative intermediaries have grown and solidified themselves in their place. In postbureaucratic liquid modernity, the inevitable intermediating function that once had been fulfilled by bureaucratic "big institutions" has

been taken over by enclavelike speculative collective discourses. Unlike the territorially organized bureaucratic institutions, these “enclaves of collective speculation” have not been anchored to the social ground: they have floated “above” the social-economic-political realms they have tried to understand and control. Unlike the pyramidal shape of bureaucratic institutions, liquid intermediating infrastructures can be compared to clouds floating above the ground: “secondary spheres of collective speculation” above the “primary” or “fundamental” realms of marketized/mediatized social reality. (As I noted earlier, in the neoliberal/neoclassical universe, various “bubbles” can be identified, such as neoclassical academia or neoliberalism. In this section I deal only with derivative markets, the home of financial bubbles.)

Both processes of “liquidization” addressed in this book—marketization and mediatization—have developed their own “secondary” infrastructures: neoliberal capitalism has erected as one of its key secondary spheres the derivative market, the neopopular counterpart of which has been the “fifth estate” in the “mediatized” realms of society. The neoliberal/neoclassical “ordering” of society has established the reflexive, secondary sphere itself as a market. Assuming that the dispersed information about the state of the “real” economy can only be aggregated through the market mechanism, neoliberal actors have established liquid, deregulated “secondary markets” that allowed for all sorts of investors to freely trade this information, that is, to freely invest or withdraw their capital in the light of new evidence about where it is (or is not) worth it to invest (Orléan 2014). The process of mediatization has created another enclave of collective speculation, the fifth estate, which is a common discursive zone where the members of post-bureaucratic “speculative centers” (chapter 2.2.)—these “heroic elite teams”—exchange their views with observers and even critics about the alchemies of popular media-driven control. The “fifth estate” imposes the same neopopular discourse to diverse mediatized fields, including politics. In the field of the fifth estate, all sorts of political actors, professionals, and observers have convened in the hope of commonly unraveling the “new rules” of popular media-based political control in a postbureaucratic environment where the intermediating infrastructures of mass parties (and related unions and associations) are defunct. The fifth estate may well be regarded, then, as the liquid intermediating infrastructure of late modern democracy.

The secondary spheres of liquid intermediation have been expected to aggregate the dispersed collective intelligence that is scattered across the primary realms of economic markets and media-using people—the “fragmented wholes” of late modernity. These “secondary” enclaves of collective speculation harbor meta-discourses in which the main actors of marketized and mediatized social systems can reflect on how to control the fragmented whole through the allegedly “liquid” instruments of the free market and the popular media. These meta-discourses are meant to aggregate, “from above,” all the dispersed information about “primary” reality: the “fundamental” processes of economic markets (new technologies, new innovations, the opening of new markets and new demands, but also risks and structural problems) and the circuits of the popular media ecology (trends in media production, innovation, technology, campaigning, and in audience preferences, usages, consumption patterns).

Derivative markets and the fifth estate share enough of their key attributes to be theorized in a common conceptual framework, as post-bureaucratic intermediating infrastructures, “secondary spheres of collective speculation.” Four key attributes need to be highlighted.

1. The collapse of role distinctions. The main actors of both spheres overcome the role distinctions that once had been imposed by the bureaucratic ordering of their field. Derivative market actors are sellers and buyers of assets, lenders and borrowers of capital at the same time—surpassing the old settings of regulated finance when these roles were fixed in the relationship between commercial banks, investment banks, and the well-demarcated groups of their clients. The key experts of the fifth estate—the consultant and PR and polling industries—are also blurring these roles: they increasingly act as the prime consumers of the intelligence they produce, since their clients (politicians) lack alternative intermediaries (like mass parties) that would allow them to judge on their own the success of neopopular strategies (p. 119–122).

2. Endogeneous adaptation processes. The main flows of intermediation in secondary spheres are primarily meant to interconnect speculating actors with each other, rather than with the primary field they are speculating upon. Speculating actors believe that more substantial and universal intelligence can be distilled from these intrinsic communication flows than from a more direct connection with a field

that would inevitably result in particularistic understandings. Vital to the health of intrinsic information flows is that all actors can connect with the prime information-aggregating institutions of the field, like ratings agencies at derivative markets and pollsters in the fifth estate. These “*crème de la crème*” institutions are highly powerful, however, this stems less from their objective information-aggregating capacities than the fact that they have the most sensitive nose to smell out the mythical common sense of the moment. The highest institutions of secondary spheres may well be regarded, then, as the key intermediaries through which the whole of the community articulates its own mythical self-understanding.

3. Complexification instead of self-limitation. The illusion of a universal understanding of the fragmented ground hampers actors in reflecting on their collectively shared stereotypes. Secondary spheres maintain neo-orthodox “information monocultures” which are like tumorous vegetation in the sense that they feed from the social body without respecting its organic reality, but following instead their own inner logic of reproduction, even at the price of destroying the feeding body itself. With this analogy I aim to point to the inner-driven self-expansive logic of speculative discourses—which does not mean that they are always false. The collective intelligence aggregated by derivative markets or the fifth estate is often reliable and correct. The very problem with speculative rationality, as argued above, is that it seeks the universal laws of an extremely complex and fragmented reality in the belief that these universal laws cover even the most exceptional situation. In the world of speculation, there is no such a thing as an “abnormal” event that would suspend the universal laws—there are only more and even more complex situations that can be made intelligible with more and even more complex models.

4. Counterperformativity. Due to their self-totalizing zeal, secondary spheres amplify the “abnormality” of those exceptional situations they ignore and mishandle. They are “counterperformative”: they play an active role in the creation of such abnormal, rule-defying situations. The derivative market and the fifth estate, these allegedly flexible information-aggregating systems that have been hoped to increase the responsivity of capital allocation and politics, have enclosed themselves in irresponsible feedback loops with “counterperformative” consequences. Financial market actors who intended to decrease the risk

of capital investment by spreading it all over the market and called this process “securitization” have ended up accumulating and concentrating risks and creating immense insecurity. In the sphere of politics, the neopopular race for exploiting the alleged rules of popularity has corroded people’s trust and loyalty to politics and only aggravated the growing unpopularity of politics.

(8) The Dialectic of Liquidity: Postbureaucratic Rationalization Reverts to the “Total Myth” of Collective Speculation

In the emerging “liquid” infrastructures of social control, bureaucratic role distinctions disappear and due to the melting of roles, members of speculating crowds find themselves in densely interconnected webs of collective sense making, which speculative “enclaves” encourage imitative mythical thinking and imitative behavior. There are good reasons to argue that liquid control infrastructures and their speculative “monocultures” have emerged in a structural process of “postbureaucratic rationalization” – the end result of which has turned out to be a conformist and standardized world that is just as “rigid” as were the outcomes of the preceding, high modern process of “bureaucratic rationalization” against which the main proponents of liquid control had revolted. To grasp the parallels between bureaucratic and postbureaucratic processes of rationalization, we may lean on a key observation of political economy (Orléan 2014; see also DiMaggio and Powell 1983), namely that conformist imitation and monological “isomorphism” may result not only from bureaucratic coercion but also from uncertain conditions where the means of control and survival are ambiguous.³ Following this hint, I will argue that the postbureaucratic rationality of liquid infrastructures and their speculative monocultures shares a great deal of the “iron cage” logic that Max Weber famously associated with

³ “Not all institutional isomorphism, however, derives from coercive authority. Uncertainty is also a powerful force that encourages imitation. When organizational technologies are poorly understood . . . when goals are ambiguous, or when the environment creates symbolic uncertainty, organizations may model themselves on other organizations.” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 151)

bureaucratic rationalization. The “iron cage” of neopopular collective speculation will be interpreted in this section as the product of the dialectic of liquid modernity.

The dialectical hint that the neopopular “liquidization” (mediatization, popularization) of politics has directly produced an outburst of self-totalizing myths calls for a new understanding of the structural transition from bureaucratic high modernity to liquid late modernity. This transition will be reinterpreted in the following as a shift from a bureaucratic rationality aimed at establishing social control through the territorial reach of pyramidal “big institutions” like the mass party (see Chapter 1) to a postbureaucratic, speculative rationality which hopes for more control from aggregating actors’ dispersed collective intelligence about today’s unintelligibly complex social reality. While the model of bureaucratic control had operated through locally present institutional structures, the model of postbureaucratic, liquid control rests upon commonly trusted discourses that would aggregate the dispersed wisdom of all actors—that means, it rests on collective intelligence about collective intelligence.

The key myth of “liquid” control, that collective intelligence offers more solid access to social reality than the intelligence of bureaucratic institutions (e.g., the bank that assessed on its own the risks and the profit opportunities of debtors individually, or the party that represented electorates through its own infrastructures) has nurtured a collective speculation on collective intelligence. This circular, self-justifying, recursive character of postbureaucratic reflexivity is hard to grasp from the viewpoint of standard theories of second modernity. Many late modern theories (of reflexive modernization, postindustrialism, post-Fordism, postmodernity, late modern individualization) have suggested that the shift from first (high) to second (late or post-)modernity has been driven by actors’ self-reflexive recognition of the limits of the bureaucratized world of high modernity (I am referring here to Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Zygmunt Bauman). A key trope expressing the shift has been to argue that late modernity embraces the very ambiguity of modern life that high modern rationality suppressed with its dichotomic, binarized thinking, which justified modern order by separating the orderly from its inferior, abnormal “other” (Bauman 1993). In second modernity, the often heard argument goes, this “either/or” principle has proved unsustainable and has been replaced

by new innovative strategies based on a “both/and” vision of the world (Beck and Lau 2005, 527).

In this book I have told a different story in which liquidization is being driven by a recursive, speculative rationality instead of a genuinely reflexive rationality. As I have shown, the emerging infrastructures of liquid control have not allowed dichotomic boundaries to melt and undergo genuine revision. The “both/and” vision of the world has too often proved to be a simple alibi for the continuing production of the inherited, stereotyped “either/or” narratives of modernism. The neopopular discourse (see Chapters 4 and 5) has fostered something very different from self-reflexive, flexible thinking: the tumorous expansion of the binary classificatory schemes inherited from modernity. No doubt, I have argued, liquid control has brought a new flexibility of thinking—but this has been the flexibility of mythmaking, that of recombining and increasing the sophistication of old modernist stereotypes without changing their very essence. The discursive practice of “liquid binarizing” (chapter 4.3.) has allowed for the survival of old dichotomies and taxonomies in the construction of the new liquid world—it is exactly this essential gap between the created world and the cookbook of its creation that I have tried to unravel in this book.

My claim that the dialectic of liquidization has brought an outburst of self-totalizing neopopular myths calls for revising the Frankfurtian equation between bureaucracy and “total administration” and total myth. This modernist critique of bureaucracy has informed many late modern theories, as well, which opposed an exclusivist-oppressive high modern past with a more reflexive, less totalistic late modern future. However, it is obvious that such a dichotomizing narrative stems from the “either/or” universe of modernist thinking: it falls dangerously close to the modernist mythmaking the eclipse of which it celebrates. By contrast, my book has suggested that mythmaking has not been eclipsed; on the contrary, it even amplified itself with the weakening of bureaucratic control. The outburst of “neo-orthodox” speculation has brought a “new age” that is more densely saturated by “total myth” than the preceding, bureaucratic age of first modernity. Unexpectedly, it is the end of the bureaucratic modernity that has triggered the outburst of self-totalizing myths.

Having reviewed some of the control discourses of bureaucratic “big institutions” like the mass party, the TV newsroom, or the Fordist

corporation, I have argued that the bureaucratic institution has not been as self-totalizing and as exclusivist and conformist as Frankfortian and late modern theories have suggested. As I have shown, the discourse of bureaucratic control was composed of two different discourses: the genuinely bureaucratic discourse of availability-based control postulating that the people are reachable through the territorial grid of the institution, and the alternative, nonbureaucratic discourse of a popularity-based control that aimed to reach people through popular “resonances” triggered in the media realm. Each “big institution” analyzed has maintained, as I have argued, an unequal balance between these two modernist discourses of control. This balancing proves that “high modern” bureaucratic control was able to embrace ambiguity. The mass party, as we have seen, has seen itself as a class party but also as a people’s party. It has mobilized its followers through its own organization, but it also made use of image making and media advertising. TV journalism has targeted the evening newscast at an imagined figure of the average viewer, an idealized impersonation of the popular audience, a journalistic fantasy embodying the desirable balance between the responsible citizen who dutifully tunes in to news and the effortless impulse-seeking spectator enjoying her privacy. Even in American broadcast television, the purest manifestation of mass entertainment, the key figure of the anchorperson was constructed partly as brilliant, “resonant” entertainer and cultural hero and partly as an inevitable family friend who is “just there,” self-evidently, whose position does count.

Each of the two discourses of control was built up of modernist binaries representing adverse potentials (e.g., people’s loyalty has been interpreted in both discourses as immobility and mobilizability, passivity and educability etc. [p. 87–88]). However, this “mess” did not bother bureaucratic elites-in-control, who, until the moment when the territorial infrastructures of their institutions worked effectively, did not strive to build a precise, immediate knowledge about the “real” preferences and affinities of their clients. Bureaucratic control was more opportunistic than purificatory, more relaxed than compulsive. As Michael Schudson’s firm manager, speaking in the name of his fellow managers, admitted that they advertise as they go to church, just to be on the safe side without much afterthought, bureaucratic elites paid their dues to the gods of popularity and image making, but they relied primarily on the territorial grid and the pyramidally organized staff

of their bureaucratic institutions in controlling their clients. As long as these infrastructures worked, bureaucratic elites—party leaders, news editors, Fordist managers—could live together with unresolved dilemmas and vague hints when it came to the question of “what the people want” and what they would chose were they allowed to do so. They did not strive to get to the bottom of the mystery of “the popular.” Bureaucratic control was driven by habit—and not by the insatiable desire for a full understanding and the domestication of all ambiguities that is the essence of totalistic mythmaking.

As the “big institutions” of high modernity have been discredited, the discourse of “popular resonance making” burst out of its subordinate position and amplified itself into a self-totalizing, purificatory “neopopular” discourse about media-based liquid control in postbureaucratic times. Proponents of the neopopular discourse aimed to surpass the opportunistic, habitual stance of bureaucratic control and tried to establish universally valid understandings of the fragmented whole. However, these attempts could not resolve the deep ambiguities of the complex whole they tried to manage—instead, they have developed new techniques of making these ambiguities bearable. Unlike bureaucratic institutions, which had opportunistically maintained two parallel infrastructures of control (availability-based and popular resonance-based), neopopular experts tried to “domesticate” the unmanageable complexity of the world so that it would fit into their self-totalizing discourse. The models and techniques of popular control seemed to harbor a sensitive and complex understanding but in fact they retained their dogmatism, and due to this “turnstile” character (Barthes 1972b) they have been very feedstock of self-totalizing myths that cannot be disproved in the name of the ambiguities of “reality.”

The postbureaucratic rationalization of late modern society has led to the rise of “secondary spheres of collective speculation” where unfalsifiable and neo-orthodox “total myths” are being produced. The self-totalizing logic of collective speculation, however, differ substantially from the total institutions that bureaucratic rationalization erected, according to Weberian–Frankfurtian allegations. If the dialectic of bureaucratic control has been feared to erect a world of “total administration” that fully absorbs social life, today’s dialectic of “liquid control” may well be feared for erecting enclaves of “collective speculation” that alienate themselves from social life. The speculative

enclaves, these liquid, postbureaucratic infrastructures of intermediation, are structurally similar to the fields of academia and the high arts, the “fields of restricted symbolic production” (chapter 2.4., Bourdieu 1993) which float above the social ground and are entirely propelled by their inner laws of collective knowledge generation. The fifth estate or the derivative market have distanced themselves from their “fundamentals” just as much as high art or academia have immunized themselves from outside control (the taste of the masses or politicians, etc.). However, while such an immunity from external control (p. 118) is vital to the health of artistic and academic discourses, the same process of separation between the neopopular discourse and social reality brings deadly consequences to democracy, for it makes the elites uncontrollable in both senses of the word: able to escape any attempt to hold them accountable, and blind to any external condition urging them to abort the code that drives them.

The enclaves of collective speculation are blind, self-propelled robots which create a chaotic new world that resists solidification (Bauman 2012). Collective speculation has a logic of total mythmaking which, however, is very different from the one that Frankfurt theorists (and Weber) had been afraid of. Bureaucratic logic, in its pure form, would have a “performative” power to impose its bureaucratic order on society. In the bureaucratic “iron cage” feared by Weber and his followers, collective consent with the rules of control leads toward totalitarianism and a fully administered society. By contrast, the enclaves of collective speculation, the “iron cages” of a postbureaucratic modernity, have a “counterperformative” force. In the speculative “iron cage,” collective consent invalidates the consented rules of control, produces chaos, and blocks the learning and self-repairing capacities of social systems, among them politics. The liquid world of mediatized populist democracy forms a “postnormal” landscape where rule-governed normalcy and rule-defying abnormality collide, where the established rules of the new “liquid” age are possibly valid and invalid at the same time. This book has shown how the systemic rules that actors commonly attributed to the “liquid” system of mediatized populist democracy have been undermined—paradoxically enough—by the very fact that actors collectively followed them. The collective, intersubjective invention of a “new age” of popular media-driven politics has created a chaotic environment where the commonly imagined rules of the new

age are not generally valid. Even worse, this “postnormal” political world has been commonly misperceived as “normal” and rule-governed. The liquid dialectic of the neopopular mediatization of democracy has pushed actors into producing in parallel a collective myth that betrays reality and a new reality that betrays the myth.

(9) The Elitism and Crisis of “Liquid” Politics: How to Reconstitute the “Missing Middle”?

The dialectic of liquid modernity explains a great deal of why our societies are being chronically mismanaged by unaccountable and dysfunctional elites who float in untouchable virtual skies and never descend to the increasingly chaotic landscapes of real-world economy and society. Elitism is a hardly evitable outcome of the process of postbureaucratic rationalization—or “liquidization”—in which elites erect new “liquid” intermediating infrastructures in the hope of directly connecting with and controlling the “fragmented whole.”

Elites have hoped that the new means of “liquid control” would allow them to cleverly aggregate and exploit the collective intelligence dispersed across the fragmented landscape of postindustrial economy and society. This is in sharp contrast with bureaucratic institutions that had been aimed at aggregating people themselves through their pyramidal, territorial infrastructures, rather than merely information about people. In the past, bureaucratic age, institutions like the commercial bank, the investment bank, the mass party, the Fordist company, or mass news media had been able to turn people in a given territory into their clients, clients who could be reached in person through the institution’s mid-level professionals. Postbureaucratic infrastructures of “liquid control” miss this key element of interpersonal integration, as their main operators reject the view that the “fragmented whole” can be integrated, and aim to control this whole by understanding—modeling, researching, predicting—it, from a high-above-the-ground position.

This book has shown how, in the sphere of politics, the elitist “liquid” logic annihilates a genuine and interactive understanding of the social ground and maintains a chronic schism between the social reality and the “neopopular bubble” that elites and societies (refusing to become “members” in big institutions, commenting on elites from

a distance) are commonly and ceaselessly inflating. The liquid intermediation system of the fifth estate—the applied models, techniques, practices of “popular control”—alienates elites from social reality in two senses of the word: making them unaccountable and dysfunctional at the same time. The core of this is that the self-totalizing mythical force of the neopopular discourse allows actors to evade the challenge of even the most chaotic, unexpected, counterintuitive processes in the “fragmented whole”—the media-using “people”—they aim to control. Inside the “bubble,” only prefiltered and domesticated renderings of these processes are available and no event can be seen “abnormal” enough to unfit neopopular accounts and to urge their genuine rethinking. This affects not only elites, but also oppositional actors, who are unable to effectively voice the crisis of “fundamentals,” like the irresponsivity and ever-thinner legitimacy of the political system. In the fifth estate, dissenting views can hardly represent a genuine outside to dominant belief, the two being complicit antagonists on a shared battleground. The critique of incumbent practices like political spin or image making or propaganda is itself propelled by the inward forces of the common speculative battlefield: critics attribute to these practices the same prodigious powers as their protagonists. The only difference is that critics describe these powers as evil. The weakness, blindness, irresponsivity of neopopular practices, the uncontrollable chain reactions that a “popular” campaign can incite, are rarely reflected upon, since critics are unable to point to apparent abnormalities at the “fundamental” level of political mobilization. The increasingly chaotic “fundamentals” of public opinion formation are becoming intangible in the liquid conditions of “postnormality.” The lack of a palpable “fundamental” reality that would matter and could be effectively invoked in debates deprives social critique from its resources to challenge the elites-in-control, and hampers both the dominant and the dissenting beliefs from being seriously readjusted in reaction to external crisis.

The corrosive unadaptivity and irresponsivity of late modern democracy (unaccountable elites, unfalsifiable collective myths, irrelevant reality, postnormality, opposition “bounded” by its complicity) result from the liquid, “neopopular” infrastructure of intermediation. The neopopular theories and tools of “liquid control” have proved unable to compensate for the hollowing of bureaucratic institutions of political representation and will-formation. Mass party democracies

of the twentieth century have maintained a tripartite political system, where the “upper” realm of the state and government and legislation and the “ground” level of civil society were interconnected by large bureaucratic, pyramidal infrastructures of political representation and will-formation (parties and associated unions and civil organizations). This “middle” realm of intersubjective democratic will-formation and representation lay at the heart of mass party democracy (Ankersmit 2002; Touraine 1997). As I have argued, the structural shift from the high modern system of “party-based representative democracy” to the late modern régime of “mediatized populist democracy” (chapter 1.4.) has been primarily marked by the transformation of political parties from representative mass organizations into elite organizations integrated into the state (“cartel parties” in Katz and Mair’s [1995] terms), which claim to govern the whole of the people rather than to represent a class. It is arguable that the defects of late modern democracy greatly result from the emptying of this “middle” space of intermediation and the rise of a postbureaucratic, two-partite model in which elite political actors struggle for the applause of the social “ground” with the help of “liquid” intermediating infrastructures.

The neopopular discourse, with its binary modernist logic, has justified the postbureaucratic, two-partite régime of mediatized populist democracy as the normal state of democratic politics. As I have argued, the neopopular self-understanding of “mediatized populist democracy” has retailored 19th-century discourses about “the people” outside the gates of liberal elite democracy. The prebureaucratic modernist understanding of politics had an overall binarizing logic that envisioned a two-partite system of elite insiders versus “popular” contenders. (A similar distinction between market economy on the one hand and politics and state on the other has characterized nineteenth-century classical economic thinking that inspired neoorthodox economic thinking.)

Late modern marketization and mediatization represent two ways to reinvigorate “prebureaucratic” modernist binaries in reaction to the felt inefficiency of bureaucratic intermediating infrastructures. In politics, old modernist binaries seemed to fit well the emerging postbureaucratic age and its two-partite political system from which the “middle-level” bureaucratic intermediaries have disappeared. Bringing a new life to these binarizing modernist schemes, the neopopular discourse has perfectly served the two-partite system of “mediatized populist democ-

racy,” where the actors of the “upper” realm struggle to connect and control the ground realm of “the people,” and “the people” struggle to take control over their political future, with the tools of old and new popular media channels (like cable TV, infotainment programs, news sites, or social media).

The two-partite imagery and infrastructure of mediatized populist democracy have revolved around the idea of optimizing the connections between the upper sphere of elites and the ground sphere of society. This two-partite system has elitist and populist characteristics at the very same time, as it is driven by untouchable political elites who claim to act directly in the interest of the people as a (fragmented) whole. To cure the ills of this postbureaucratic political system we need to develop new analytical approaches that can deal with the problems of elitism and populism outside the two-partite collective imagery of the neopopular discourse, which shapes too much the space of thinkable alternatives, imposes false dilemmas, and severely narrows down the potential of critique.

Much of the critique of late modern democracy has tended to stay inside the familiar confines of the neopopular discourse and its “two-partite” imagery. Too many critics have been satisfied with bringing justice to either the upper zone or the ground zone of this two-partite system. Accordingly, one of the main line of critique has claimed that the new techniques of PR and spin and marketing turn democracy into a totally administered, business-managed spectacle (Kellner 2001; Crouch 2004) that continues to effectively manufacturing popular consent even after the fall of mass media systems. This line of political economic critique has often been associated with high hopes in progressive popular resistance movements that would organize themselves, like Occupy or Indignados, through flexible, “liquid” media platforms (Bennett-Segerberg 2012). In some poststructuralist formulations, the countermovements would have to articulate in the popular cultural and media realm a populist “counterhegemony,” a common horizon that would allow “the people” to recognize itself as a so far suppressed whole (Laclau 2005). The dismissal of mediatized elite propaganda, and the praise of mediatized popular resistance, however, has greatly been shaped by the binarizing logic of the neopopular discourse, and the neopopular mythicization of the prodigious (holy or evil) powers of “liquid,” popular media-based politics. All of this exaggerates the

powers of top-down propaganda as well as those of bottom-up resistance, and distracts attention from the hollowing of “the middle” zone of bureaucratically organized representation and the corrosive spirals of collective speculation that took off in reaction to this structural void.

Another line of scholarly critique, represented by the mainstream canon of scholarly research on populism and populist political communication, has offered a very different frame to address the growing tensions of elitism and populism in late modern democracy. The canonic model (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2000; Mény-Surel 2002; Mudde 2004; Jagers-Walgrave 2007, etc.) has defined populism as the communicative-ideological articulation of popular revolt against the centrist political establishment. In ideological terms, this approach has been diametrically opposed to political economic critique, as it has taken as its main goal to defend the pluralist world of liberal democracy from the attacks of populist insurgents and their authoritarian, voluntarist sovereignism. This is, however, a clearly neopopular imagery that sets a basic distinction between the popular and the elite, in this case, the liberal centrist establishments and their sovereignist extremist contenders, and distinguishes them on the basis of their apparent, well-definable, formal communicative attributes. This framework has a mythical plausibility that veils the essential fact that populism is not an attribute of marginal insurgents only, but the key generative operational code of late modern mediatized politics. Populism, as I have shown, is the generative principle of “liquid” late modern politics (communication and policy making), which prescribes winning the support of “the people” (as a fragmented whole) through popular media communication instead of representing the interests of a particular social group through mass organizations.⁴ The fact that populism is a collective social trap where

⁴ Accordingly, populist logic cannot be linked to some privileged actors or communicative genres, for it can find its expression in any genre (rational, emotional, liberal, authoritarian, sober, expressive, funny, argumentative, or emotional communication) that a political actor in a given context believes to serve the ultimate populist agenda of fulfilling the needs and wants of “the people.” The last crisis-ridden years have clearly shown how easily the centrist political elites, so far the prime advocates of the European project, can turn their backs to their cosmopolitan engagements. Following the allegedly xenophobic affinities of their national electorates, German, French, and British political elites today point their economic and social policies against

all actors seek to please “the people” has been veiled by the canon’s neopopular research agenda, which has sought to distinguish “populist” and “nonpopulist” actors. The real distinction, by contrast, should be made elsewhere, namely, between present-day populist democracies and the representative democracies of the past where the upper zone and the ground zone, the state and the citizen, had been interconnected by large bureaucratic organizations in “the middle.”

My point is that the antagonism of populist revolt and liberal elitism has been interpreted by two scholarly approaches which, in spite of their different normative grounds, have shared a “neopopular” analytical framework. The two approaches have differed in where they located the source of good politics—in the “upper sphere,” where enlightened liberal establishments use “liquid” tools to monitor and serve the plurality of interests, or, alternatively, in the “ground sphere,” where the excluded people can make their voices heard through popular, mediatized, and flexible forms of insurgency. However, at a deeper level, the two approaches have been structurally homologous: they both have operated the neopopular distinction of the popular and the nonpopular, they both have envisioned “popular” politics as powerful and aimed to unravel whether this “popular” power is used for or against the interests of “the people.” Recombining the binaries—popular vs. nonpopular, powerful vs. powerless, emancipating vs. oppressing the people—the two approaches have been two emanations of the same neopopular practice of “liquid binarizing” that I have unraveled in this book.

The binary imagery naturalizes the two-partite system of mediatized democracy as “normal.” Behind both approaches there lurks the promise that democratic legitimacy can be established in the existing two-partite system of mediatized democracy (either from below or from

the irresponsible, overspending Southerner and the Eastern “welfare tourist” or “benefits shopper.” For the first time in the history of the EU, the mainstream political imagery places the undeserving and menacing Other inside the borders of the European political community. Western and Northern politicians use seemingly sober and rational language when they construct the superiority of their own “peoples” to other “peoples”—but their stereotyped rhetoric is nothing less populist than is the German-bashing strategy typical to Southern political movements like the Syriza-led radical left-extreme right coalition in Greece.

above). This is a false promise. The two-partite system of late modern democracy is not only unable to secure democratic legitimacy but is also directly responsible for its growing deficits. The ills of today's democracy will be cured neither by the mediatized politics of liberal establishments nor by the mediatized insurgence of countermovements, since they stem from the lack of representative institutions of political will-formation, a healthy "middle" space between state and society, that would allow people to voice their worries, contest their leaders, and intersubjectively develop common claims. The two-partite neopopular imagery too easily takes for granted the power of "the popular" and the hollowing of the bureaucratic "middle." In their important critique, Carlo Accetti and Christopher Bickerton (2015) have recently shown how the technocratic belief in the liberal establishment (as represented by Pierre Rosanvallon) and the populist belief in a genuine insurgency of "the people" (as represented by Ernesto Laclau) are, in fact, the two sides of the same coin, which is the rejection or neglect of the past régime of mass party democracy.

To escape from the neopopular trap, it is exactly the lost spirit of "party-based representative democracy" that should be reinvigorated at the first place. This would primarily mean filling the "empty middle" of late modern democracy with new intermediating institutions that would fulfill the same function that mass parties had fulfilled in their heydays: the cultivation of permanent, two-way, multilevel interactions between "the ground" and the state, through the intermediation of mid-level professionals acting as representatives. This does not mean of course to resurrect mass parties or mass unions by means of mandatory membership, but to recognize, as a start, that the bureaucratic model of integrating people into pyramidally, vertically organized institutions is by no means inferior to the liquid model of aggregating data on people and targeting people with messages. Returning to some form of bureaucratic (large-scale, pyramidal, representative) intermediation system seems to be inevitable, this being the only way to "solidify" the liquid, popular media-based regime that has produced a "bubble" of untouchable, dysfunctional, and populist political elites.

The task ahead, then, is to reinvent the large-scale intermediating organizations of political will-formation and representation that had been typical to the tripartite system of party democracy. Such a reinvention would evoke the spirit of theories on the "mesosphere"

of democracy, among them neocorporatist theories (Schmitter 1974; Cawson 1986; Streeck-Kenworthy 2005) and new theories of political representation (Ankersmit 2002; Plotke 2007; Urbinati-Warren 2008; Touraine 1997; Pettit 1999). However, this is a catch-22 situation, as such a meso-level reform can be put on the agenda only if neopopular myths lose their credibility and their critique is embraced by visible opinion-forming groups. I will finish this book by presenting three points where neopopular myths could be possibly challenged. These points harmonize with the critique that unfolds in Wolfgang Streeck's later works and interviews in which he challenges, in an implicitly "neocorporatist" spirit (and very much in the post-2008 spirit proposed in the introduction), the self-destructive drive of neoliberal capitalism. Streeck's argument, deployed in various interviews (eg. 2014), is that neoliberalism has won a Pyrrhic triumph because it could not measure up to some key standards that postwar neocorporatist regimes had been able to ensure: a balance between divergent aspirations, the relative stability of the rules of control and the efficiency of intermediating institutions to channel popular will into the state. These diagnoses apply perfectly to the similarly Pyrrhic victory of the neopopular discourse in politics.

My first point urges the critical watch of the fifth estate. The neopopular discourse, similarly to neoliberalism (Streeck 2014), won too big and got rid of all the outer controls that could have constrained its (self-)destructive logic. As I have argued, the neopopular discourse could enclose itself into a "restricted field" akin to academia because bureaucratic intermediaries who could have served as its external control have weakened, and neopopular experts have gradually become the prime consumers (interpreters, evaluators) of the intelligence they have produced (p. 120). The neopopular discourse "broke loose" and nothing could counterbalance its myths about the alchemies of popularity. It is vital, then, to establish outer controls that can place neopopular intelligence under the light of reality. This means to urge the main industrial proponents of the neopopular discourse to make their work (their predictions, their representations of public opinion, their polling and targeting practices, their causal explanations) maximally transparent and open to contestation. This can only be achieved if a critical mass of independent analysts openly rejects and falsifies neopopular intelligence in a concerted offensive that targets its ungrounded causal

attributions regarding popular communication and public opinion formation, its preoccupation with the alchemy of “popular success,” its insensitivity for complexity and ambiguity. A further step toward accountability would be to allow focus group participants and survey respondents themselves to contest the representations of the popular will that experts distill from their contributions. In mass parties, members had means to control how their local leaders represented their will at party conventions. In an ideal case, focus group and survey participants should be provided with the same opportunity; their consent should be considered as a key verifiable standard of validity (similar to other standards like the random selection of participants).

My second point calls for debunking the myth that popularity is a systemic imperative and the key to power. By inflating expectations regarding popular media-based “liquid” control, neopopular collective speculation (akin to market-addicted neoliberalism) disables its protagonists to control and manage the world. The neopopular laws of “popular control” can hardly be translated into general rules and strategies that would be worth it to follow. Political actors, mainstream or insurgent, should be made aware of the fact that today’s popular media environment is one in which political performances are sanctioned and rewarded in hardly understandable ways, and any deeper understanding of “popular” success or failure is permanently jeopardized by the neopopular discourse that tends to impose its own discursive logic on past events and rationalize everything in retrospect. Public actors have to refrain from the modernist illusion that an objective “popular media logic” exists and requires them to “connect” with the audience as seamlessly and irresistibly as possible. In order to abandon the key modernist myth of “popular connection/control,” it needs to be recognized how dangerous being popular can be. Public actors may harm themselves in those very moments when they successfully “connect” people and audiences seem to react loyally, since these popular loyalties are triggered by latent processes which may undermine, in the end, the actor’s position.

Neopopular strategies may jeopardize not only democracy, but the populist actor herself. In a “postnormal,” mediatized environment, the more attractive and mobilizing a popular/populist performance is, the more it risks to undermine its own power and bring harm back to the performer. Popular “connection” is a double-edged, inherently broken, self-undermining strategy that public actors need both to follow and

evade. This is the real structural challenge that today's media system poses to the political actor: to properly deal with the inner ambivalence of "popular connection" and to recognize that the two-faced logic of mediatization equally rewards and sanctions neopopular strategies. As the mythical logic of the neopopular discourse makes visible only the alleged rewards and hides all existing sanctions, actors have not been aware of the chaotic, destabilizing effects of their collective rush for popularity. Collective belief in popular control has made the late modern political system chaotic and unable to "solidify." Tools of "popular control" do not allow elites to forge consent and mobilize society to reach commonly accepted higher goals. Legitimate social reform, this prime promise of modern democracy, has become a distant dream in a "liquid" political system.

This stasis, which Bruce Ackerman (1998) grasps as the lack of a healthy "change engine" in contemporary politics, evokes my third point, which calls for the redemocratization of the intermediation system as the only way out of the confusion and drifting in today's politics. In contrast to the two-partite neopopular imagery, political power—the capacity to enact legitimate reform—can hardly be generated from a combination of charismatic leadership on the top and mass support from the bottom (managed by campaign staff)—for it also needs the healthy meso-institutions, primarily parties, that once made the tripartite system of party democracy functional. As Ackerman rightly points out, the task ahead (in the American context) is "to put movement, party, and presidency back together again," which is necessary after the decades when "parties have grown weaker, [and] the change engine has worked mainly with two parts—movements and presidents" (1998). Frank Ankersmit, in his masterful theory claiming that democracy resides in the "in-between" space that political representation establishes between the ruler and the ruled, argues for reestablishing the party as the representative core of democratic politics (2002). Of course, mass parties should not be resurrected, but reinvented, from their very grounds, as genuine representative institutions in a postindustrial society. This requires a substantial reform of the party system that would redefine the political party itself (surpassing the more established calls to reform the electoral system and campaign finance).

The program of reinventing the "meso" sphere of democratic intermediation and will-formation raises disquieting questions. How

to save parties from the reckless domination of party elites and their “speculative centers”? What new organizational forms could be invented so that the elitist and narrow organizations that today we call parties could fulfill again the role of genuine representation? In today’s “memberless” (Skocpol 2003) media democracies, who will fulfill the role of the “local political bosses” (Newman 1994, 15) located in the mid-spheres of party hierarchy, who could mobilize local communities and had been the holders of power inside the party during the decades of party democracy? How to empower those politicians who are willing to permanently maintain genuine relations of representation with their followers, how to establish spaces where such emerging politicians could act without being exposed to counterinterested party elites? How to recruit new representatives, if not through party channels, and how to institutionalize their eventual cooperation with parties? How to enable these representatives to articulate social antagonisms that populist elite parties are not able to articulate? How to escape from the false, elitist-populist tropes of liberal pluralism (representing the interests of the “people” in its fragmented and divergent complexity) and sovereignist populism (representing the interests of “the people” as a unified popular “heartland”)—in order to get to the representation of “meso-level” interest conflicts, namely social antagonisms between macro-groups in society (Touraine 1997) that the logic of mediatised, populist democracy does not allow to articulate? The challenges are serious and necessitate substantive reform in the late modern party system, which probably requires the erection of new, territorially organized intermediating institutions that could empower independent “representatives” and broker between them and the elites of established parties. Such a reform would require new technical and institutional tools, many of which have been established in the discourse on democratic reform (political ombudsmen brokering between local complaints and representative institutions, voucher-based financing of representative organizations and actors, drawing representatives by lot, the representation of the excluded, citizen councils with veto rights, and so on). The ultimate question is whether and how these tools can be built together into a new intermediary system that would allow parties to function, again, as genuine coalitions of various groups (representing divergent but overlapping interests), instead of being mere machines of campaign mobilization.

This conclusion—that the “meso” sphere of intermediating representative institutions has to be reinvented for curing the dysfunctions of today’s speculative democracy—is undoubtedly connected with the author’s “neocorporatist” sympathies with permanently organized, large-scale, bureaucratic intermediary organizations (Schmitter 1974). It seems, then, that my critique that “liquid” intermediating infrastructures erect a speculative neopopular “iron cage” has been greatly motivated by my attraction to another set of old modernist tropes, those of bureaucratic control. These tropes, of course, have been thousand times discredited (if there is one thing that could unite critical forces in the twentieth century, this would certainly be the critique of modern bureaucracy). In spite of all the well-known critiques, however, bureaucratic institutions have also been associated with positive mythical values, too: social integration, an ability to act, equal treatment for all clients, civilizational potentials, effective vertical information flows between the ground and the elites. My “neobureaucratic” or “neo-neocorporatist” suggestion to invent new meso-institutions that could build on these values is undoubtedly just as much a “neomodern” claim as are the ones of the “liquid” discourses I have criticized. Indeed, this trajectory makes me propose fleeing from the controversies of postbureaucratic control to the properly renewed principles of bureaucratic control—which is no less “neo-orthodox” an endeavor than was the neoliberal or neopopular return to the retailored tropes of prebureaucratic modernity in reaction to the crisis of bureaucratic control. Undeniably, the urge for reinvigorating the “missing middle” openly draws back on “preliquid” models in order to invent the proper political system of a future “postliquid” age.

My critique of the dialectic of liquidity itself seems to be a part of the broader dialectic of modern (enlightenment) thought which, as Adorno and Horkheimer have shown, relentlessly seeks for renewal—a more universal understanding that saves us from chaos and fear—but what it finds instead is the repetition and totalization of old truths. The critique of a self-totalizing modernist dialectic cannot be but modernist itself (the critique it represents totalizes farther the modernist discourse). Indeed, as I have argued (p. 154–7), if my critique of neopopular myths detaching themselves from reality points to forgotten fundamentals (like “latent events”), this pointing is itself less to be taken as an objective revelation than the construction of a countermyth which is

not a bit less modernist but which builds upon remote enough areas of the modernist universe that stand in a strained relation with neopopular mythmaking and thus allow the analyst to capitalize on the possible tensions. Here is the source of the hope that my dialectical critique of the neomodern collective hype around “liquid control” may incite more than a circular rambling in the modernist house of mirrors. The possibility of creating tension between modernist myths and counter-myths (in our case, the neopopular mainstreams and the critique of collective speculation) opens another possibility, that of actors recognizing that they have at hand two antithetical, irreconcilable models of political control: one associating “popularity” with power, the other associating it with chaos; one suggesting the popular realm can be directly known, the other claiming all we know is popular opinion about popular opinion; one envisioning mediatized politics as a popularity contest, the other seeing it as a Keynesian beauty contest; one fostering the modeling of the fragmented whole from above, the other fostering a return to a representative intermediation system in the middle, and so on. Awareness that irreconcilable models of political control are inevitably present might lead to the invention of parallel infrastructures of control—evoking the parallel presence of availability-based and popular resonance-based control practices in the life of bureaucratic big institutions. Such a return to the opportunistic and pragmatic “balancing out” of particularistic models of control would certainly represent, in my view at least, the hallmark of a “postliquid” turn that could put an end to the chaotic production of self-totalizing myths in mediatized populist democracy.

Appendix

Appendix to Table 3.8

The explanatory variables appearing in Table 3.8, in the order of their appearance:

Approves the government's campaign for organizing the Olympic Games

Index constructed with Principal Component Analysis.

First principal component explains 58 percent of the total variance of the five following variables. (Respondents were asked to express their agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5. The scores of negative statements have been reverted.)

“Organizing the Olympics is a big challenge, but we can achieve it if the country joins its forces.”

“We have much more urgent problems to resolve than the Olympic Games.”

“The idea of organizing Olympic Games is a mere campaign trick of Fidesz.”

“Only the capital Budapest would profit from the Olympic Games, at the expense of the countryside.”

“Building the Olympic infrastructure would create many jobs and give an impetus to the country's development.”

Approves the conventional values of conservative nationalism

Index composed as the sum of the following attitude variables. (Respondents were asked to express their agreement with the following

statements on a scale of 1 to 5. The scores of negative statements have been reverted.)

Attitude variables:

“Politicians who do not believe in God are not suitable to hold public office.”

“Nationalism threatens the development of the country.”

“It is more important for a politician to be a good patriot than to understand particular policies.”

“The Church has too much influence in Hungary.”

“We should strive for peacefully reuniting Hungary with the territories populated by ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries.”

Approves PM’s flight to Boston at state expense to accept an honorary doctorate at Tufts University

Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale of 1 to 5, in function of which of the two statements below they agree with.

“The award given in Boston is an honor for the country.”

versus

“In the present state of the country, it is not affordable to travel at state expense for this decoration.”

Trust in institutions

Index expressing respondents’ overall trust in the institutional system. Constructed with Principal Component Analysis.

First principal component explains 37 percent of the total variance of the following variables:

“How much do you trust (on a scale of 1 to 5) the institutions below?”

Options: government, parties, parliament, president, municipalities, courts, constitutional court, churches, army, police, trade unions, public service TV and radio, the press, banks, institution companies

Alienation

Index composed as the sum of the following attitude variables. (Respondents were asked to express their agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 5.)

“People like myself do not have a say in what the government does.”

“Ordinary people cannot break the law, while the high-level misbehavior is not brought to justice.”

Approves the law giving a special citizen status to Hungarian minorities living in surrounding countries

Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale of 1 to 5, in function of which of the two statements below they agree with.

“It is necessary to give a special status to ethnic Hungarians abroad.”

versus

“The priority should be on helping the citizens of Hungary.”

Believes that PSB TV is biased toward the government

People were asked that out of the three news programs available, which one was biased in favor of the government. They could freely name any of the three evening news programs.

A total of 41 percent of respondents claimed m1 is biased. (By contrast, far fewer respondents judged the two commercial TV news programs to be either progovernment or pro-opposition [around 10 percent].)

Approves the state-subsidized real estate credit introduced by the government

Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale of 1 to 5, in function of which of the two statements below they agree with.

“By introducing this credit, the government is helping many people.”

versus

“The credit is not a real help for many people.”

Self-defined liberal

Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale of 1 to 7, in function of whether they define themselves as conservative or as liberal.

Approves the state of economy and her own economic perspectives

Index composed as the sum of the following attitude variables. (Respondents were asked to express an answer to the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 meaning a strong deterioration, 5 meaning a strong improvement.)

“How do you think the state of the economy has changed over the last 12 months?”

“How do you think the financial state of your household has changed over the last 12 months?”

“How do you think the state of the economy will change over the next 12 months?”

“How do you think the financial state of your household will change over the next 12 months?”

Political involvement

The political involvement index has been constructed with Principal Component Analysis. The first principal component has accounted for 43 percent of the total variance of the following variables.

Variable	Correlation between variable and the involvement index
Willing to vote	0.56
General level of knowledge	0.76
Talks about news	0.53
Knowledge of party leaders	0.72
Interest in politics	0.69
Variance explained	43%

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The Neopopular Bubble is a truly eye-opening, trailblazing new study. Péter Csígó sets the commonsensical idea of the "mediatization" of contemporary politics in an entirely new perspective. Misinformation, miscomprehension, and misadaptation—too often downplayed as occasional lapses or mere "work accidents" of political procedure—are revealed in this thorough, meticulously documented study as pivotal, all but defining features of the emergent politics-media tandem. Their summary effect is a self-enclosed universe conjured by that tandem and operated from within it, in a deepening separation from the daily life of targeted political subjects and media consumers. Csígó's study is a powerful insight into the mechanism of the widely noted, but still poorly understood breakdown of communication between the political elite and the society it administers.

Zygmunt Bauman, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Leeds, author of Liquid Modernity

This is a very original, witty, and thoughtful book, most particularly in its development of a double critique: first, of the media industries themselves for creating and reinforcing the myths associated with media's supposed resonance with their audiences; and, second, of the academic field of media and cultural studies for not distancing themselves sufficiently from these industry myths. This is a genuinely original and rich line of analysis, which forcefully hits out against the self-fulfilling interpretative bubble in which industry and academic commentary live. The field of media and communications—and wider cultural sociology—does not see many attempts to integrate cultural and media analysis with wider social and cultural theory of the sophistication offered by this book that has the potential to have major impact.

Nick Couldry, Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory at London School of Economics, author of The Place of Media Power

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